

DISTANT PAST



AN ANCESTRAL ZINE

Part 2: Writing

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The following zine contains instances of violence, blood, lynchings, drugs, slavery, and crude language. Viewer discretion is advised.



*As Many Good Things As You
Can Steal in Twelve Sweeps*

Rhythmic-Idealist

As Many Good Things As You Can Steal in Twelve Stolen Sweeps

HestiasHearth/rhythmic-idealist

A massive thank-you to my incredible sensitivity reader, Tulip ([Tumblr](#) + [Twitter](#): [g4megrrrl](#)).

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Content Note (TW): This work contains direct depictions of slavery, including medical abuses (non-gorey, none too specific in imagery, but disturbing) in that context; discussions of killing, including grubs; discussions of Alternia's imperialism and genocide; mentions of torture; that overhanging fact that at any second Signless could be arrested and/or murdered for being what he is; and some explicitly-illustrated harm to animals.

i. *All we did, all we ever did was fucking try.*

You hop off the great marble rectangle lining the stairs nimbly as you can, with a hand to its smooth surface to help you down, and then you just start walking, because in these sorts of highly controversial, spontaneously-seized venues (the steps of a library, today) you don't tend to stick around.

A troll still jogs up in front of you partway down the block, and they're one you recognize from the small crowd you'd gathered, and so of *course* you stop.

"I wanted to let you know how much it means that someone as terrified as I am is taking a stand. I-I, mean, I'm sorry, probably more terrified than I am. I'm sorry. I can't imagine, the things you've been through."

"Thank you." You start with that, warm and simple, and you let yourself mean it in isolation for a beat. "I don't think that there's any use in comparison like that- I don't think I consider the rankings you've given our respective sufferings as true as you do, either, I don't think I would order them the same way, but the point is they don't need to be ordered. Neither one of us should be afraid. You shouldn't be hurting."

She looks like she's going to fall apart shaking, and you offer your hand just an inch in front of yourself, until her eyes widen at the gesture and it makes her shake worse. You're about to drop it when she takes your hand, and you squeeze her fingers, to let her know it's okay.

"It's good to meet you," you continue, when she's had space to speak and chosen not to. "Do you want to walk and talk a while longer? There's extra meat we have to use by tonight; it would be nice to have someone else for an early dinner."

The woman in front of you looks at you like she's unsure if she's allowed to say no to you, and unaware if she is allowed to say yes. The hemoanonymity has complicated this for others before, but she's felt the warmth of your hand. She can assume you're lowblooded.

You take a small step back, hold your palms open, and smile with closed lips. "It's okay," you continue. Her eyes are averted down, as they have been throughout, but it's just now that you realize yours haven't met hers yet, and wonder if that's why. (You know that isn't why. You know why.)

On the offchance that it is, though, you give it a gentle try. Your eyes try to find hers for two, three seconds, and ultimately it *is* that brief little kind of connection you hear it's supposed to be for people, if none too often with strangers.

(On the Alternia Before, you're willing to bet it was with strangers. You just wouldn't really know, with as little time you get, and whose eyes you're looking through. You remember one instance, though. With a friend, not a stranger: You'd had something very sincere to say to the girl with the bright red glasses, and so it had seemed worth the effort and the off-kilter loudness it leaves in your head. You understand the connection. It's like they're drilling too far into your pan to keep up with, or you too much into theirs to remember words, but here and there, when trust is called for, when it's a moment that matters, it can almost be something you want. It was much less terrified, less tenuous, than this, but for a second, the planet feels normal.)

She scampers off, looking over her shoulder.

And the whole interaction just scrubs at your insides in a nasty way like steel wool, scraping out the inside of a pot, but it's definitely not any fault of hers. On the walk home you keep trying to figure out if you were persistent enough, if there was more you could have said or anything you held back from that could have been more genuinely validating- and if you did, then *why*.

You offered your hand. To you, a brief (brief) squeeze is a gesture of affection and reassurance, but in a split-second's panic it could look like you're trying to keep her here.

You didn't make assumptions. Offering dinner doesn't make it sound like you think she's not feeding herself or not being fed. It does sound a little like she has at least the freedom enough come and eat with you, which you know isn't necessarily the case; being out and about now doesn't mean she's allowed to at every hour of the night. Dinner's a reasonable time to be expected back.

You didn't say that if she did have some curfew she would be breaking—or if she didn't, but home still hurts—that she just doesn't have to go back.

There's a reason you didn't. It's overwhelming. It never works, it never makes anyone feel safer, but it's—maybe it would have mattered, this once, maybe it would have been needed. Maybe she's one of the very few on Alternia who are stretched out to the edges of their proverbial chains wrung thin enough to be near-breaking, and only waiting to hear a chance and take it.

She assumed you're "more terrified" than she is. That your life's one she can't imagine. You'd talked, in the sermon, about being usually hiveless. You'd talked about living out at the edges of Alternia without explaining why. You roll your answer around in your head, striving to remember exactly the shape of the words you said, that you wouldn't say them the same, that there was so *little* you would say.

...And if this is sounding wildly out of context, or like an absurd kind of mental catastrophe without any grounded real world framing (you've been accused, before, of mental catastrophes without any grounded real world framing), then picture this:

You're four sweeps old.

The world only is as big as mainplanet Alternia and that's its surface doubled, because you know about its underground, and tripled, because of the vision thing.

That is so, so much larger than it is for every other little lowblood you will ever meet.

That is so rarely limited by walls and doors, chains and ships and threat of drowning or lifeless void around you if you tried to leave them and once, when you hid inside a cellar but were too young to understand why, you cuddled into your mother's arms safe and warm and marveled at the experience. You were as quiet as a mouse.

The world is as big as as far as the outdoors will take you, and they will not take you far from your mother on a good night, because you've learned very well how much she loves you and how much you love her, but still it's rolling deserts, valleys filled with pink-white tufts of hopbeasts' breath and wrinkling forest fungus in every color you've ever seen. It's meandering along streams 'til their end or 'til they slow to a trickle or halt at the edge of a cliff, or 'til Trollmom brings her forearm down like a guard rail, bumping gently against your chest, and steeeeeers you around in the other direction because this adventure's stopped feeling safe. It's every wartflanked croakbeast in them, and every dragonfly that when you sit still enough lands on your nose and all of the hums in the air between them.

That is so, so much smaller than it is for every other little lowblood you will ever meet.

You've never waited to be shunted off planet and never stared at your skin until three in the afternoon wondering which bits will be removed, what it will look like with ports embedded, or given yourself a premolt tattoo because fuck it the work would get erased anyway but you won't have the chance after adulthood.

Sweeps later, right now, people will still say you were uniquely wrung out and spat upon; resilient in ways a spectrabound lowblood can never understand.

"Thank you."

You will silently never agree.

...

"Don't you make fun of me, I knew damn well you would be coming home in one piece." Trollmom's pointing her fork across the table at you like an accusatory finger, which is a little less threatening with an accidentally-well-done chunk of antlerbeast flank flopping off the end.

"It wasn't a fair joke," you answer, and you mean it. Your trollmom worries a lot, and that's because she's had to. You don't mind it. She doesn't mind it; you both mind the backbending praise people give her for taking on the heroically tragic task of caring about a life that's going to end anyway.

It just happens that she does, and you can try to be as kind to the troll who raised you as you are to people you haven't met yet.

She pouts at you suspiciously for a second longer, and then it seems like you've overestimated how much you might have hurt her, because she grins- and she prods your arm, and that's a little code between you two, for when you're not reading signals quite right. You smile and breathe out.

"I did. I knew the intelligent, compassionate, perceptive young troll I raised and I know being seven and getting into trouble," she continues, with a waggle of the eyebrows. This is usually the part where you roll your eyes as loudly as you can (you find her past fascinating, actually, but she has much more fun this way) and she chides you, thoroughly tickled, for being so rude.

You shove out a little "hah," and in retrospect didn't plan it very well, because your brain was still honed in on drawing fork-lines through the mashed tuberfruits she didn't even *need* to use today with dinner, because now you'll both fill up and the rest of the meat *will* spoil.

Glancing up, it does not seem like you can save this.

"Kankri."

"Mm, m mouf s full."

"You've just shoveled that into it for the first time tonight, I'm watching you."

"Judging when and how much I choose to eat as a troll who owns and best understands my body is an inherently authoritarian act."

"Kankri Maryam, if you have ever abused a tuberfruit paste worse than this then my walking carcass has never touched daylight."

You take a breath, then respond very evenly. "It's *just Kankri*."

“...It’s just Kankri,” she amends. She, too, took a pause to deescalate. “Kankri. You are abusing your tuberfruit paste.”

You are abusing your tuberfruit paste, a very farmlike set of rows dug through it until you’d started to scratch up your nutrition plateau. That’s not good, these need to last.

You set your fork carefully to the side of your nutrition plateau, and tap your frondpad at the floor instead.

“When you were still in caverns, you were under constant orders, but you were technically free.” You’re quoting her, not making assumptions. “A jadeblood isn’t under lock and key, it’s just that her social status is.”

“That’s true,” your trollmom answers, wrinkling her eyebrows.

“And when you left the world became a thousand times more terrifying, you became in far more danger, but you were still, in many ways, freer.”

“With no doubts.”

“As though you escaped some of Alternia for another, more distant piece of it.” You’ve stopped quoting her, now, though you’re trying to reflect back something accurate and test if it sticks.

“...One could say so.”

“I’m sorry, should I—?”

“Kankri, darling, whatever has set your thinkpan buzzing so loudly, it is not solely the condition of my disgraced jadeblood status.”

Suddenly, and increasingly, your acid tract is feeling very full. You ate breakfast this evening. You feel the skin on your back, its precisely one scar, and are reminded of Kankri-from-Before’s hyperawareness of the newness of his shoes.

Gulping only succeeds in making your throat sticky instead of raw, and you say, too quietly for her to hear, “We didn’t need to use the tuberfruits.”

“What?”

“We didn’t need to use the tuberfruits.”

“Oh, Kankri.”

She stands up, and you say “I’m fine” in a tone that would be more fitting to Kankri from Before than to you, because you’ve never once rejected her love. Her hand hesitates, in the air, instead of landing on your shoulder. She’s stepped about a foot in distance, around the side of the very small table.

You grab her hand and complete the gesture, loving her strict policy for consent and hating that you did that.

Your other moves in quiet, swiping motions as if to gently dispel something from the air.

“I met a woman after speaking today,” you begin, because that’s, really, the shape of it. You leave tomorrow. You will never know if she’s okay.

Trollmom agrees to try to find her again, for just an hour, first thing tomorrow.

You were still under constant orders but you were technically free. You left it and became freer; we left it because I can be freer or dead. You left it and moved into constant danger; we left it for safety from constant danger already.

‘As terrified as I am,’ or more, or less. ‘I can’t imagine the things you’ve been through’ and you can’t imagine hers.

The world is as wide as everywhere but a consistent hive and everywhere but a cage, it’s narrow enough to keep away from movie theaters and even lowblood wrigglers’ arcades and to never set foot in an auction.

So which am I. So which am I. So which am I.

ii. *We accept the radical notion that a person does not need a place to be justifiably a person, one with value, one with worth, and one with insight.*

The next sermon is also small and impromptu, and the next sermon-adjacent thing you interject into the public consciousness after it is during a startlingly damn effective intervention into an arrest—you save a troll’s life, and people start saying the things that’ve been floating around in your brain before you’ve had to say them, and you start to see proof everywhere of how much this could work.

The *next* time it’s out front of one of the few corner stores seedy enough to let you hang around the front door so long as the conversation you generate’s good enough for business; and the *next* is a meeting you announced and arranged with the people you met there, gathering intentionally, instead, just after sunset a half-hour outside of town; and the *next* is quietly, between just three of you, while you’re bandaging someone’s hand.

You've sat staring at the ceilings of tents and renthives and abandoned cavern entrances among the wastes for hours, tossing a phrase or a paragraph back and forth with your trollmom until it's parseable. You've spoken in bars after ending barfights—you've spoken and started them, or, at least, spoken until someone else is riled enough to start them. You know that the violent choices others make in those instances belong to them, but when you're speaking in such a way as to break up established patterns of safe and predictable fears so as to bring in radical and wildly new ones, you know you must do so responsibly. You try again. And again.

Tonight, you've been getting to know this particular city for weeks, and it's been long enough that you've arranged a meeting place people can actually come and feel safe. It's a warehouse, huge and cold and with very, very little light. Most of you are seated on crates, or large tires with treads the size of your closed fist, a few trolls more comfortable standing. Two, though, have volunteered to stand by the door, and they're cycling in and out with a third, which means one will quietly come back into the circle and poke another on the shoulder to switch shifts every ten, fifteen minutes.

You're in the factory district end of a relatively neglected urban center. It was something like you've— *not never* seen before, because you have, but you've never understood how they work.

Technically, absolutely no one here is free.

"The question it always comes around to for me is *why*."

It's not the world's most fucking novel thought. You're pulling threads together from conversations yesterday, mostly. The hums of assent in the crowd are soft and uneasy, but they're there.

"If we need to *hurt* for the sake of order then what *for*, if we need to *sacrifice* something for progress then what *for*; I could ask all night why the sacrifice needs to be *us*, or why lowblooded fears are the fallout of highblooded ones that matter, but there has to be a thing we're *afraid* of. There has to be something, even before we *begin* to question whose posture nubs it falls upon, that we're afraid will happen if we don't uphold it.

"I don't think we're afraid of peace.

"I think we're afraid it's impossible, I think that there are people who are afraid of *disorder* or afraid of *worthlessness* or of lacking a *place* and I need to ask again what *for*."

"And as long as *progress* is the ultimate answer, as long as *Empire* is an entity and a universal truth and a thing to strive for, then we've—yes, all of us are going to spend our

lives trying and failing to ever prove we're quite enough. We're set up to justify our existence, and justify our breath, and promise that food and shelter and patience won't be wasted on us because if we return enough value to this *thing*, we'll be enough. It's why people die of exhaustion, it's why we know that every now and then a lowblood or twelve is going to die in the streets at the hands of a highblood's rage and I have never been inside an indigo or purpleblood's nugbone—" (no one here knows exactly what you are, but you don't think that's a stretch, you don't think that despite clinging to the fortunate grey that still stretches itself in concealing-enough patches over your irises you've said something that damns your point) "—but I *swear* it's why the rage bubbles up so loudly. We are allowed exactly three sharp squares for kindness.

"Anywhere else—if you feel the inherent wrongness of a planet like this pushing down on you from all sides, if you are vaguely aware of the sheer amounts of pain around you and yourself only as a vehicle for it but allowed no friends to lean on—rage is the *option*. Rage is the option that comes with privilege, and crumbling, forever-internal hurt is the option without it, and I have to. I have to fucking ask what needs us to live like this.

"Because the thing is that if progress is for *Empire*, or for the *species*, or for *trollkind*, then we have to ask what those things are. And it's people. It always comes down to people. I cannot find, and tell me if you can, any other abstract good in the universe to base things upon."

You have to remind yourself of the pause you take here. Slowly, the block catches on that you *meant* "tell me if you can," and there's some shifting and shuffling, quiet. Someone says: "The messiahs."

"I can't bring myself to *care* what any messiahs want if they aren't interested in taking care of trolls, all of us, over death mandates."

No one has anything to say to that.

And so you go on, after the moment is settled: it has to be people. It always has to come down to people. If you *begin* there, rather than beginning with who's at the top and why we should work for them, it becomes apparent that there isn't a reason. Every single thing this Empire is predicated on is logically circular, and every single thing it demands for order is that we hurt each other or are hurt, to no end.

"I've never been able to find anything of value to strive for but people," you say, at the end. "I've never been able to find anything to cosmically rank me, as though we need to be one above the other and not side-by-side holding each other up, but I know that if life is worth anything that thing has to be kindness. And it *is*. Horrorterrors' Emissary herself, it is."

"And maybe we can't undo every way this planet has been constructed to damage us in a night. I'm not asking that. But we can change how we value each *other*. We can help each other survive, because that's worth something.

Your voice lowers, and you say, "I want all of you to know you don't have to stay here tonight. It's also time to turn the conversation around to the block, but before we do, I want you all to know we are prepared for that. We have food, we have imperfect and fluctuating shelter but it belongs to *you* and it is free if you will take it, and we have the promise of safety in community."

"Do you have suppressants?"

You try to be aware of your facial expression, and not blink too much, outwardly. Your gut's twisted without your consent. "No. We would never subject you with that, or seek to dictate what is happening in and what you are able to do with your body. Your power is yours."

The troll who asks has opened their mouth a few times before you finish. You figured it was worth getting out the full sentiment anyway, and it probably was, but they add, rather sheepishly, "No, thank you. It's that—at least three of us would go into withdrawal."

The sick feeling takes a turn for the worse.

You schoolfeed your voice even, though. The last impression you want to leave is that, in your empathy for someone, *they've hurt you*. "Where would we get those?" And the conversation winds down that track for a while.

The next is about what freedom even *is* when it's freedom on the fringes. The next is about what the worth of a troll means. The next cuts that third one the fuck short with—

"No, thanks, I'd like to jump back to *freedom* please."

You're getting ready to make your promises that you will, but the younger troll who'd chimed in about the worth of a person very emphatically defers to their elder, and so of course, you take their cue, and stick a pin in their point to come back.

"What's on your pan?"

"Just thinking about the chucklefucks kicking back in Tiffbout wondering how much gold they can get by with betting on a fighting ring wriggler and still cut their losses, while we're here talking about this."

You don't know where Tiffbout is, truthfully, but. "I think about those things too." You do. "I firmly believe that every one of them is equally drawn to be kind. That those Alternia is stacked against are targeted and hurt with more direct trauma, more consistency, but we are all hurting, and we will all learn to lift each other up. I believe that whether or not they know they need this now, they can give it."

"But they're not gonna move first, or do you think—"

You let out a breath. "If I could reach them, I would. Already, we carry a disproportionate burden. All I know how to do and survive, right now, is teach each other how to survive it, help each other survive it, but I do not intend to let it stay that way."

"I think you want me to stop serving the bag of bulges who owns me and start serving someone else, just let this guy say who—"

"There's a difference," you begin, "between kindness and servitude. It's a complicated one."

"Here's what's on my pan."

She slows her speech down so that there isn't so much of a burnout accent, and you're opening your mouth to tell her she doesn't have to, but she holds up a hand to you, harshly and without negotiating, and you realize how much your constant interjecting is leaving her tripping over words and you cut it out.

"You're going to have to be real fucking careful, telling slaves that we as an inherently kind species are solely defined by how we are *good* to other people."

"Oh." Fuck. *Fuck*.

"Let us finish a sentence sometime."

iii. *We reject the constructed Alternian ideal that will tell you your kindness is weakness, and in the same breath that the belief that you deserve it, the notion that you could demand it, is entitlement.*

There was a longer conversation after that. You sat down together, and you thanked her, and looking back, it went on much too long after you're sure she wanted to go home. Mostly, she was tired.

She didn't come with you. No one there came with you. It turns out that, though you could have your conversations unsurveilled as long as you planned them very carefully during breaks and trusted everyone's silence for each other's sake, everyone there is—

chipped. Microchips, in people. You know there's a way to break them, because one troll who'd done it for a friend before very quietly raised a hand and the whole room went hush when they made the offer.

It just doesn't come without risk.

You've made some progress since back then. People freed, people helped; always, always learning.

Tonight is different from any before it, though. Tonight you're breaking into a one-building slave holding facility: Not a mock subgrub with scattered supervisors and borders you'd managed to skirt past as long as you're only passing through, or a lavish hive with one live-in slave who is allowed out to do the shopping and leaves alone or goes back, first, to try to convince the rest, but the kind with chains, and concrete walls, and, sometimes, biocables. The first time you stepped inside one, you were eight sweeps old, not entirely aware what you were doing, and lucky you got out alive.

The second time comes with much more planning.

The things you know about the untitled cement-slab building on the furthest edge of the cement-slab-building side of town are as follows:

It's an "experimental facility." Very few trolls are permitted to know what's going on inside it, and that means very few are permitted in or around it. Because of that, it remains almost constantly understaffed.

Fact two: it's surrounded by barbed wire, blooming in great coils around the window. That's not much of an expense, but still excessive enough that it *did* make you suspect that it needs it. You know that psionics who have not burnt out are generally unchipped, because at anything beyond the lowest energy levels, the signal gets interrupted. You don't know the specifics.

You know the facility at least sometimes does its torture on psionics because of an accident someone told you happened three sweeps ago, and because when a psionic is the source of an explosion, no matter what the smell, no matter whether you can tell if they're still alive after it (this is always what you look for first)— the form surrounding burns take is visually distinctive.

You were made to wonder, after spotting the frankly excessive amounts of wire, how low-tech the rest of the security might be. Someone said the black market has their finger dipped into this place, hence the nondescript building and little info, then again, someone said the Empire did. (You- you haven't been asking around too obviously. That would be unwise. It's just that to a lot of people, that explosion was the most exciting

and noteworthy thing that's happened here in some sweeps. Sometimes most exciting just means the most emotion they've felt in a while.)

Because you didn't know, you've proceeded with as much caution as you can anyway, but it was the first thing that made you look at this horrible, as yet unknown to you worse-than-deathtrap and go *this can work*.

The once-slaves who already *are* traveling with you, two currently out of a historical seven overall, didn't come from anything like this. But they confirm with what they know that you're not totally shithive, and this can work.

(Their phrasing. You're okay with being a little bit shithive, but it's not about this.)

In all the Disciple's weeks of being in the right place at the right time, she has seen that the entire guard staff seems to arrive and leave on the same small omniscuttlecoach, rotating thrice a day. The one troll in a different uniform, whom you have to assume is a scienstiff (or else a more horrible, mediculling- or engineerending-bent career, depending on whether or not their work is considered to be on people), arrives independently: They start their night around seven P.M., and, though a rustblooded driver has picked them up on occasion if they stay too close to daylight, seem to prefer to walk.

Someone who repaired its exterior electrical systems once found you after a sermon to *suggest* this same plan, when you all were already working on it. You had to tactfully not tell them where the Disciple was at that exact second just in case.

They know that the facility runs on stored power. They don't know if someone held there powers it up, or where else it comes from, or when, and so as espionage goes, you all have a new task (you help with the espionage least, your Trollmom second-least, the escaped ex-slaves in your company never. You stick out like a sore thumb, your Trollmom sticks out like a slightly less sore thumb, and you are never going to put someone who ran away from slavery in extreme and explicit danger of recapture if you can help it).

In any case, you don't wind up working out when exactly things get charged, but you do work out where the fusebox is. So there's a nifty shortcut.

And so: Get there at the sunrise guard shift, convince the four trolls on duty then out, one way or another, and cut any fuses linked to surveillance. Arshel, one of the trolls traveling with you, teaches you how to identify those. Have Trollmom waiting *right the fuck there* on a cue, so that in the event that you were *wrong* about the fuses and cut someone's, worst case scenario, life support, she's there to get it *immediately* back online. It had taken a lot of fucking maneuvering, a lot more than that, but you're in.

The interior of the building is as dismal as the outside has been, nondescript cameras lining the walls as you'd expected but with no indicator lights blinking.

They, the cameras, probably once activated any number of more violent security systems. Fortunately for the Disciple's life and yours at best, and those of everyone else here at worst, you'd done your shit right to get those offline, too. Or maybe they'd just needed the camera circuits to function. Again, your job and expertise aren't running logistics, but you'd better damn well be confident in what other people are telling you. (There happen to be a good seven people at home, currently, whom you trust with your life. The moment you stepped through a single threshold in this building, you entrusted them with several others.)

The facility, aside from the garage and office you'd walked through on your way in, is one vast block. Medicull cots and tables on full display, configurations of biotechnologies you don't recognize taking up half of the space. They are the only thing here that is maintained, you think; the kind of meticulous clean that never stops smelling of bleach and doesn't match the porous concrete of the floor.

Almost everyone here is at or under seven sweeps old. It's made you very mindful of how you, an adult, hold yourself in the block. Everyone is psionic whether rustblooded or gold, and everyone wakes from the one half sopor patch they were allotted to stare at you the moment you set foot inside.

You tell them everything you can.

You tell them that you're here as a friend, where the guards are, that any power dedicated to security is down. That the power hasn't been drained from the battery to do it, no one will need to work twice over.

You tell them about the movement. That it exists—that there are entire swaths of people, if in trickles, if still breaking the inertia and supporting each other past fear, looking at the Empire and stepping away.

You decided before you came in that you would tell them about how you are mandated to not exist, and yet you do, and have now ten sweeps running. That you know about staying hidden. That you won't be the safest troll to be with, but that you know every single trick and you can stay by their side as long as they want, if they come, that you'll love to be their friend and love to know them, but that you can teach them the tricks and say goodbye, too. That this is freedom, it's freedom to stay with you or leave you and come again and leave again if they please, not a master by another name. You tell them about the communities you've met, people who shouldn't be alive but are, trolls who weren't going to be free but bolted before their wrigglerhood ended or made it out themselves. You're not the expert on escaping slavery. You've met the experts, though, on these kinds of pasts and freedoms. These trolls are the experts on theirs.

You're just a vessel to pass the rest forward. You know what's out there.

You tell them about the Alternia we had before, about these rebuttals to the ideas of all we are capable of being and all we were meant to be. You tell them where you see it proven today. You don't need to be right to know peace is possible. You don't need to be right to know trolls can be kind. You've seen kindness every night since you were hatched, and you took what's arguably a chance and your trollmom and you aren't just a fluke, and you've observed a thousand smaller steps toward peace. They don't need to believe the visions. You know what's inside you is real, but you aren't running a religion.

You tell them about how the fact of their blood has nothing to do with their worth. About how even if strength matters, a blueblood owns his own, so why can't a psionic own theirs, so what makes bending an iron rod in two worth more if you can do it with your arms than with your pan. And after that, after the groundwork is laid, why does it *matter*. Why the fuck would the quantity of labor we produce matter, why the fuck would someone else own it, what *makes* a blueblood own their strength but also own a psionic's—you don't get too far into theory. But that isn't divine right. It isn't even the fact that they *can*, and so *should*. It's millennia of systems that have been laid down, that no one has earned, that no one has the right to earn over them.

You tell them "I know we can love each other beyond the few neat squares we're prescribed because I know I can love each one of you. I know we can hold each other up and keep each other afloat as friends or distant strangers because I know how many people's love has kept me alive, and because removed from everything this Empire wants us to be, the moment we step away into a space where it stops wringing us dry and into someplace we can breathe, we can be okay. I know that you don't need to like me or be like me for me to want kindness for you, to offer it to you, and to expect nothing back, because the sheer idea of any of us coming closer to healing is enough." The sheer thought of any one of them owning their lives, whether or not you see another second of it, is enough. On second thought, as you run through phrasing in your head, you tell them that, too.

And then you open your hands down at your sides, palms forward, and it's their turn to speak.

Eventually, someone does.

"...I want to check the cameras. Fix the cameras."

A taller kid with horns bent to nearly stab into each other, still scrubbing sopor smudges off their temple, stands to make the request. Every motion is against the wall instead of toward you, but the Disciple would later clue you in on how they'd been trying to decide

whether to rush you- dampeners on, and the time and tools to take them off safely all the way back home, that's the option they'd have to demonstrate loyalty.

You nod, taking a small step back to invite them forward. "You're welcome to, I only ask that for your friends' sake, if you find confirm they are off and *can* repair them—"

"No." The troll who cuts in is one who caught your eye earlier. He, like you, is distinctly recently post-molt, and so he must be just about ten.

You've been told, when you're not being called a young unruly punk who doesn't know what he's talking about, that you seem old for your age. You don't really know what that means on you, because you don't see it. Your trollmom thinks it's the two lifetimes thing. You remind her you don't remember past six in the first one.

You have this split-second thought, and you worry that it's offensive, that that's what he looks like.

It's really not the creak to his knees, though, or the sore stoop to his shoulders. You have the latter of those; that would be hypocritical. You still don't think it looks particularly old. It's not the stress-greys that are coming in around the temples, because every psionic who is able to make it long enough gets those eventually, and that *would* be hemophobic. The shuffle to his step is psionic overexertion in his pan; that, that's the same deal.

It's more the way he stands in the space. Gleaning things from body language is still lost on you, watching for fear you're committed to getting a handle on and watching for aggression you're hopeless at learning, but it's not something that he's feeling or expressing. Watching him walk the two barefoot steps he takes toward you, the cracks on his frondpads mirroring the cracks in the concrete floor and his one-piece suit layered with the same dust, it feels like he's been here forever and is going to be here forever.

You also know, you realize, with no threat display at all and no certainty as to why you know, that he would kill you for any troll in this block.

"They're off. I'd feel it, hear them running fucking constantly. Not that kind of trick. Sit down."

He speaks with a lisp, slowly, and deliberately moderated, with each sentence already decided before its first word is out. Sometimes, he sways a little unevenly toward overly loud, and clamps *immediately* back down to overly soft.

"It's Signless, right?" You had introduced yourself, yes. You'll stop doing that in high-risk situations where people haven't sought you out themselves in a sweep or so, it becomes

too much of a threat—a tiny ounce of extra risk and the removal of plausible deniability to everyone who heard it and can now have it mind read, chucklevoodooed out of them, a little smear of your color on people who didn't agree to be a target—but even now you don't place a magnificent emphasis on the title so much as wedge it in where relevant, so it's nice to hear someone take the time use it. The way he does feels like he's grinding it between his teeth and looking for flaws. It's okay, though. You're not hurt.

"It is. How should I call you?"

"We don't have those."

"I'm sorry. I know. Would you be comfortable, instead, with me calling you friend?"

He shifts on his feet for a long moment before he answers, and then goes sharply still and you're reminded that he can see you staring. You direct your eyes back up to the scaling skin between his eyebrows. He stops paying attention to your eyes visibly, and flicks his instead back to the Disciple, who has hung back, aware of her blood.

There's a fifteen second space. You're counting because you learned, once you started leaving more of them more pointedly, that people aren't comfortable with making them too long, either. All you can try to do is make room.

"It's alright," you continue, "I make the offer because it's shorthand to make it clear that knowing you matters to me, not because I need something to call you by—"

"You really are that bent on being" (and he gets very soft; you resist the urge to lean in. You make out "...aren't you").

"I'm sorry, I just couldn't hear, being—?"

"*Contagious.*" You could have figured that out. Context clues. There's supposed to be acid behind his voice, but the way he says the word you can't tell if he genuinely believes it.

You take a pause to consider—you've worked out your answer, but the body language to go with it takes a second longer—and then smile with closed lips, and gently nod. "I don't consider friendship a disease. I don't know which arguments you've heard that it is, though, although I know the ones I've heard."

"Enough," he answers, soon enough that it can't have been in response to the words you actually said, "to prove I was schoolfed."

The tension in the air is building, and if it's doing that for you, then it's hard to believe you're alone. "Do you mind if I sit down?"

He huffs, you wait, and finally—"What, were you asking us."

"Whether you're comfortable with that, yes."

"...Sure."

Most of the wrigglers were already sitting, anyway. A couple that had stood with him sit. One stays standing as long as the adult troll does.

The Disciple, bless her, leans loosely against your shoulder as far from ready to leap to her feet as is possible.

Once you're all seated, it's silent, and you're faced with deciding who speaks first. You go. "What have you heard?"

When a psionic glares at you the word becomes literal, too bright to look at. Meeting his eyes is easier for you than it is with most strangers for arbitrary reasons you aren't sure of, and harder because eventually, you start to see spots. "What have I *seen*."

"What have you seen."

He might have been glaring as a challenge, actually. When you glance away first is when he lets his breath out to actually speak again. "You've probably got the space for attachments. We fucking don't."

People cycling in and out, people being bought and sold, people dying. "I'm both amazed that you've found ways to protect yourself against the situation you never deserved, and sorry that you ever had to, but you do not need to stay here."

You talk with your hands when you're trying to find the shape of a point, but you don't do it when people have the capacity to be scared by you, or by sudden movements. You won't shrink *in* on yourself, but you do take the Disciple's hand instead of making large sweeping motions with yours, and she takes it as a fidget toy immediately.

"I promise you, out there— not just the Alternia you grew up on, the one you know better than I do, but the space we've built— it's still hard. But there's *room*. I promise you we protect each other as much as we can, and once the world feels even the slightest bit secure around you, there's more to gain than to lose from loving and being loved. I promise that, building the community we are, our pity glands are things we need to budget less strictly."

"You promise trolls are going to stop being trolls because you and a couple dozen other flukes have managed."

"You're right, I think, that I shouldn't make promises for other people. I can tell you that I intend to make it easier."

The Disciple speaks up, almost too quietly for the space because she knows she can be so loud, "I can tell you that I intend to make it easier. Beautiful people." Peo-purr makes it in on the edge of her voice, as one of those places where it's her accent more than a pun. "I didn't know people could be beautiful."

Squeezing her hand, you continue, again, "I believe that I'm not special, and that everywhere we create space, the world is changing."

"You're going to tell all these gutterblood kids they have something to hope for and then tgth-" He almost *bites* his tongue as if in punishment for tripping on his fangs, finding words again in a very calculated way- "they're gonna get hurt for knowing it."

"Ah," you say, and when you hear it, it's very quiet.

"You think you can sit there and pick me apart."

"No, I don't." Something settles very hard and uninvited in your chest, abruptly. You have to force yourself to be conscious of your face, because the thing it was going to do was probably a *smile*. Not because it's possible for you to feel happy in a setting like this, at a time like this. More like the kind that comes with an inappropriate laugh when everything's too heavy for a troll who doesn't know how to feel those things with sincerity, or like you've just heard a piece of a very sad story that reminds you of a different one you forgot existed, because—

What's hit you as he said those words is the undeniable feeling that *you knew him*.

Like you were in a recreationblock you used to know very well, bickering over what would've been very nearly a falling-out if your five-sweep-old friendships back there, Before, hadn't been impossibly resilient.

Contrary to what he thinks, it has nothing to do with how intensely you know you don't know him now. You don't think you can sit here and pick him apart.

The Disciple clears her throat gently, a sound that doesn't stretch past your auriculars sponge clots. (On second thought, maybe it does—he said he could hear electricity moving through the cameras.) "Befurr this," her rrs soft but, you note with a hint of a smile, present; she gets embarrassed of them in public, "I thought so too."

He looks tired, doesn't bother as much not to trip on his fricatives. "You're the convert who's gonna convert me."

You look to her on that. "No," though, she answers very simply, "I'm not."

"I'm sure, miss. Good cop?"

"Her title is the Disciple," and he raises an eyebrow at you, and that did perhaps not help the point that you're not a religion. It didn't occur to you. *Miss* and *sir* and your rush to address them could probably obscure your judgment of a lot of things, in exactly the opposite way the words were designed to.

"Or 'furriend' is okay."

He snorts, with effort, like it needs to say something. Genuinely you wish you knew what.

"I—" and "It's—" you and the Disciple start at once, and so you pause, and you gesture lightly to her, and she goes on.

"It's not a prproblem," she says. "We don't really use 'miss' and 'sir' when talking to equals, that's all. I bet a purrson could. Could you do that with words?" Before you can say the thing you've opened your mouth to say, she does: "We don't have time fur fancy semantic theories right now, though. I wanted you to know I used to think so too. I didn't believe in kind people when I first came along. Just Signless. I just knew it *should* be true."

(You remember the quaver to her voice, still very out of practice: It's nothing, right? It's easy, right, when there's nothing to leave behind?)

You jump off of that, grateful. "I firmly believe that you should have the chance to carve out what you deserve, whether we can provide it on a guarantee or not."

His eyes do something the Disciple or Trollmom would understand. You, you don't know this one, you're mystified.

"Well I think want to go." Oh, oh, it's your friend who wanted to check the cameras.

They are, as was your first impression, very tall, but you also finally notice they're trying their very damndest to make themselves look taller. They stood to say it, and, no matter how smoothly and slowly you move, flinch when you stand after them. You show your palms, open, your chin further forward than your horns. You step back, once, twice, and then you speak. "You're welcome to stay with us as long as you want to stay, and you're welcome to follow me out of this building and then no further at all."

They look at you for a long minute, maybe thinking, maybe awaiting some cue to speak. But you wait, still, and they ultimately say, “I think I want to stay there.” They cross the room to you.

“I think I wanna go too.”

This is when you smile, it breaking open with relief, and they cross the block more quickly and stand between their fellow runaway and you.

They’re the first of eight trolls, all in all, who cross over to you. The troll who’s been speaking the most and the troll who waited for him to sit before wait on the other side as the ninth and tenth.

“The block hasn’t gotten any quieter,” he says, and it means something to everyone else here but you. You look to your side— the Disciple didn’t understand it either. Trollmom’s still waiting vigilantly outside.

The wriggler next to him, one of the youngest, speaks up. “Them or us?”

He jerks his head at you, and coincides the gesture with a sharp *sh*. The *sh* isn’t for you.

The same kid says “...It’s loud for me all the time, right?” and he looks *ill*.

All of the trolls who’ve come over to stand with you are six or seven. When she comes over, she makes it six, seven, or five. Now, now that you’re finished with most of your speaking, you let it wrench your acid tract half out of you.

He takes a very long, slow breath between flared nostrils, flexes and closes his hands, and says “You can grab any of our prescriptions from the office somewhere. I am guessing that you know how to pick a lock.” You didn’t use that skill today, but you, in fact, do. Each syllable is very careful again when he’s talking to you.

“Are you coming?” the Disciple offers in a casual way you will one night get a grasp of, still smothered all over in love, and he says

“In a minute.”

Everyone is safely in the office when the medicull side of the main block explodes behind you.

iv. One wonders why the things power fights so hard to silence are the things our nature is supposed already to predispose us against.

You've been thinking lately, about names, and how to own them.

When you were anywhere from one to three nights old, your mother named you by sheer accident. Impulsivity, an encyclopedic knowledge of what a troll's name *should* sound like, with reference to the available hatchname registry both running and discontinued, and a sudden confrontation with the fact that she looked at you and saw a troll.

If it weren't for the same instinct that gave her trouble looking at you without a name to call you by, you might not be alive: One doesn't go to the trouble to identify a grub's bloodline before they've decided it will live. Hatchames take investigation, whether it stops at a set of distinctive horns or gets as far as partial genetic sequencing. So when Porrim Maryam had stumbled upon a sickly mutant grub three hundred meters from the caverns' entrance and immediately felt *wrong* not knowing what to call it, that was a decision: this one's a full person, it needs to be called like one. You hold an immense gratitude for it, for her love.

You hold an additional gratitude for the old first name she'd chosen, with no *lusus* to do it properly: Within properly-jade schoolfeeding there isn't a need for things like engineering or strategy or a knowledge of the surface law, so there's room for things that are beautiful, instead. Alternian epics, works of the old prophets, mixed in with poetry from outer planets transmitted in attempts at peaceful first contact or carved on their homeworld into clay. Included in the curriculum, and censored enough (you must think), to satisfy that "yes, there were aliens" precursor to the lie "look how much worse they were."

The old first name spins off from a dead language's word for "perfect" (also translated "water," "silver"), though it had never been a language trolls spoke. She chose it because it was a word she'd always loved, couched within a word too disgustingly soft to serve as more than a citation for someone else's weakness. You colonized your name.

Your name sound, another disconnected relic of a dead or dying people. (You still don't know which.)

It hadn't made much sense anyway. Surnames (that's your "hatchname:" Maryam, Hermod, Tritoh) are assigned according to sign and ancestral legacy, of which you have neither. First names come from the sounds a *lusus* calls you, which is the mechanism through which it seemed possible for her to name you at all, but she is a troll, not a *lusus*. The name she should have had at her disposal, then, the weird thing she'd felt missing, would be the hatchname, but she became an ex-matron in that moment, so she'd had no right to assign a hatch.

Until you were two, you completely perplexed the poor woman by refusing to come when called. You remember the feeling, but you don't have any memory of the

resolution—just the story the way she told it. You, lying on the floor on your stomach, scribbling out one of the drawings she still wishes she’d saved of hives and cities you swore you’d been to. Her in the corner and nearly as bright as the sun, trying persistently to practice at dimming it down:

Your trollmom had called your name four times in a row to get your attention, and you’d only looked up on the fourth. She let out a small huff. “Don’t hold your colored waxtube in a fist so tightly; you’ll break these ones too and then we will be out.”

“Yes Trollmom.”

And she’d gone back to her work. This you do remember, vaguely— it looked like the strangest meditation you’ve ever seen. Before she ever *did* figure out how to contain her glow, she would also cycle through trying to wear herself out, concocting teas with all kinds of things she knows to act as a sedative, overstuffing herself with *lusus* blood and winding up sick for two nights, and composing prayer poems so goofy that sometimes, you’d try to get in on composing them, and she’d (never in so many words) go “why the hell not.”

But this was still only week one of the glow, and she was only *beginning* to be desperate to go near civilization and shop again.

You, of course, only vaguely understood the importance of this when you interrupted her. “Why you call me that?”

“Why *do* you call me that. Call you what, sweetgrub?”

““Why *do* you.”” Perplexed at your trollmom being so silly, but much less perplexed than she was, you repeated the name, and she repeated it back to you.

She’d been trying, thus far, to just peep out of one eye and maintain her quiet but vein-busting concentration, but at last ceded to the idea that this was not multitaskable. She uncrossed her legs. You’d paused in your drawing to face her, your little pout Very Serious. “On the very first night I found you,” she began, soft like a sunrise story. And she’d told it all over again, loving, and sincere, and opening her arms so you could crawl into her lap.

You were very polite and you always loved the story, you just weren’t totally sure why she was telling it.

“You look concerned, dear.”

“I remember the story.”

"And so—"

"Why do you call me that?"

A little helpless, your mother had continued, "Well, because it's your name, love."

You'd squinted, and scrunched your eyes up, stumped, like a little puzzled raisin. "But my name is Kankri."

(When you ask her what she said after that, she says, "Well, your name was Kankri.")

It was Kankri Maryam, then, because it had been Maryam before. You don't have a caste, or a sign, or a bloodline. And your trollmom does. She figured that meant you didn't have a home. If you don't have a legacy to push yourself into- if you don't have anywhere that will claim you- it broke her heart. She wouldn't let that happen. She claimed you.

You love her endlessly.

You're... not. Though. You're not a Maryam.

"Darling." She turned off the stove, setting a lid over whatever it had been that was cooking. Scent-memory says it had too much cinnamon. You remember that time where the only seasonings you'd been able to get your grabmitts on had been cinnamon and stingermint, and so they, one or both, were what every meal tasted like for three perigees until you ran out. It must have been around then. You'd just turned seven.

"What on Alternia has you saying something like that?"

"It isn't *wrong*, Mom."

"You are as much *tied to me* as *any* descendant I'll never meet—"

"I'm saying it isn't *wrong*." The frustration bubbled in your gut and you had your wits about you enough to recognize this problem. Pause, rephrase. "'Nothing is wrong with that.'"

Her face fell, in that soft, wounded-for-you way such that you can hear the "Oh" before she says it. "Of course it isn't, love. You're magnificent, a thing the Mother Grub hatched and one she intended."

"I know." You say, and then, "I love you."

"I love you, dear."

"May I?"

This means *I know there are words if I start speaking out loud, but I need to just start spewing them to get there*. She knows it, too, because she helped you identify and distill those words.

"Of course."

"I am casteless. I am a signless mutant and I'm going to be one for the rest of my life, I have no idea where I came from in the grand reproductive history of the planet, and until we sit down and sequence the hue-determining stretch of my genome in its entirety to find out what I would have been without one twisted allele, I am never going to know, it wouldn't be me, I don't have a bloodline. I don't have a caste that's alive. If you're right, and censorship isn't being stupid, and I am the first, and the one I would have isn't neon, second-messiah red—

"If I ever work out what it was, whatever caste they belonged to, it's disowned me. I'm without a sign and without an ancestral name. I *want* to be honest about it. I don't need—"

She softened in a way that doesn't look like you're dying. "Okay."

"That's the point, Mom. I don't need a blood tie to be tied to you. We both know that."

Her cheeks pulled at the corners of her lips stiffly, in a way that looked like it hasn't quite stuck. You crossed to her to rest a hand at her shoulder.

You swallowed, and the unknown and unrecorded (but surely very small) quantities of blood like yours buried underneath the other stains on the cavern floors stuck itself to your tongue, less like copper, more like lead.

"I *want* to be that."

"Oh, darling, I *never*—" Wanted to cover you up, wanted to make it something wrong, wanted to slap a bandaid *over* you rather than watch you live, loudly, and if she'd continued the sentence you absolutely would have let her, but she lost track of it. You knew her well enough to know. You told her.

"I know."

She's probably a lot of why you *can* want to be that, though you like to think you would have figured it out anyway. Kankri, the other Kankri, he fucking helps, but you like to hope you would have learned it anyway.

For as inept as you feel stepping into it now, staring at the people who might've halfway claimed you from the outside, she gave you a lot less of Alternia to unlearn.

.....Signless, the title, that's self-explanatory.

Meulin (the Disciple) had looked at you while you promised in soft hushed tones that yes, you were sure, and she squeezed your hand very tight and said "It's *purrfect*" with the widest, most perplexingly frondnubbing-the-line between shit-eating and earnest kind of grin you've ever seen, and you think that moment is when you both started to fall a little more in love with each other.

It means "I'm fucking staying here, and you have to look at me."

v. If ever someone or something endeavors to deny that your goodness, your personhood, are yours, remember which constructs stand to profit. Remember which ones profit from fooling them.

"I'm thinking The Ψiioniic," he says, staring up at the dappled light from the tree branches above you like he's not narrowly resisting a shit-eating grin.

"The Psiioniic."

"The Ψψψψiioniic, aψψphole." Here's the grin. Oh, he is *magnificent*. "Enunciate."

You laugh out loud. You laugh a little bit because it's the thing to do, or otherwise he won't know you get the joke and you two are still okay, rather than you feeling yelled at.

You mostly laugh because it was, in fact, hilarious, and this man knows how to genuinely get a real guffaw out of you. You would be taking him more seriously, even so, if it weren't for the fact that you have figured out that gently humor-framed seriousness is something of a Mituna-signature interpersonal style, not insincerity. Respond to the momentous announcement of his title with appropriate weight and you might as well just stab him where he sits, huh.

"You're willing to mock the pronunciation of an illiterate, uneducated hiveless man? I thought I knew you better, Thp. Psp. Ψiioniic; am I pronouncing it right?"

He grumbles like he's genuinely offended by the actual appreciation you slipped in there. "I guess."

"No, let me know, Ψiioniic."

"Ψiioniic."

"Ψsspthsiioniic."

"Pretend.... your inso, in-its-i-iiinsolence blaster's full of bony ass fucking knives," the Ψiioniic critiques, setting his sharkiest grin on display just to make the point.

"...You said ass-fucking. I heard that, that wasn't bony-ass, that was ass-fucking, you're not pulling one over on me; how exactly would one-"

"Mmmmmmmwouldn't *you* like two know, softmouth, sof'mth *scrub*. Waitwaitwait. Wait. The *Inciseless*."

You laugh, and he shoves your shoulder, and you catch his hand when he does and kiss it. He sticks his tongue out at you to give the air a loud raspberry.

"It's a good title."

Grumble grumble "Mmmmm, that sounds like avoiding the challenge to me." You are not going to pretend your mouth is full of bony ass-fucking knives. That feels horribly offensive, and like you'd be leaving his self-deprecation unargued.

You are going to try to get his name right, though, so you do think about where his teeth would be compared to his tongue and land that the way he's written it into the title. Without calling them bony ass-fuckers.

They kind of change the shape of the vowels, too, so you go all out.

"The Ψiioniic."

He grins wide, like he's just won a difficult prank against you. "Well, you lipsed the *the*, but yeah, that's it."

Ah, the prank is making you look like an ass who makes fun of speech impediments. See, you thought it must be, but the thing is you knew you might trip over your tongue and don't feel bad for it. Just like for once *you're* the one left adrift being called upon societally to pronounce things with someone else's mouth. You let him have it because of how fucking great this is.

"How shall I make reparations for my egregious ableism today, Ψiioniic. Did I- I fucking lisped 'reparations.' Shit." He *howls* with laughter and opens an arm to you, and you, obligingly, scoot.

It's nice, like this. The ground beneath you is damp enough to get mud all up through your cloak and into your pants enough that you're starting to feel it, the air dense

enough with fog to keep all the moisture in the earth packed in. The bark behind your backs is too rain-sodden from the night before to risk causing a scrape.

“HMMMMMMMM.”

He scratches at his chin with an exaggerated expression, but the pause *is*, genuinely, for thinking, and so you do not interrupt with the laugh he’s overtly playing to.

“I think this’ll do.”

He glances at you to see if you’re alright, because the two of you are still navigating the touch-during-friendship thing, and so you tip your head back over his arm— oh. It’s around your shoulders perfectly, actually, so that where your cloak got dragged a little in the scoot you don’t risk a scrape anyway. He remembers things like that fastidiously, once you’ve said them once.

You tip your head all the way back to touch the tips of your horns to the bark, and let out a breath.

There’ll be chores to do in a couple hours. It’s your turn on dishes and he’s drying, so it’s not like that’ll be the end of the conversation anyway. There’ll be hard decisions to make tomorrow about the state of your constantly-in-flux traveling troupe: either food is stretched very thin tonight, or not everyone who wants to stay can stay, and you know which direction you and almost everyone else here is leaning but that doesn’t make it your decision. But for now, it’s normal, and there’s nothing much else to do, and that’s worth things you don’t have words for.

The Disciple bounds over to you after you’ve had about twenty minutes of quiet, plunking down on the mud with her legs loosely crossed and saying, “I found the loudest pawrt of the rifurr.”

This could be two kinds of request: come with me so that I’ve got a second set of aural sponge clots, or come with me because I gotta *gotta* show you.

You look over at the Ψioniic with one eyebrow raised. He restrains himself, this time, from laughing at it, but makes sure you *know* it’s narrow restraint. “Wait here, I’ll contact the press.”

“Kankritter, love of my life, would mew purr-lease put words to how much legal trouble we can get in if our dear furriend contacts the press?”

"I'm sorry, I was never schooled on the law." The Ψiioniic is standing to join her, and so you do too, untrapping his arm from behind you and offering him a hand the rest of the way up.

The river is, in fact, loud. Rolling and enormous, just fifteen minutes upstream to where the branch of it you came traveling along meets three others. The Ψiioniic breathes out a "shit" in awe of it, which is an achievement, getting that from him. You all stand to look at it for a minute. There's an island in the middle filled with dead and broken trees. For a second, you worry that that's the part of it Meulin wanted to explore, across very real rapids, and then you remember that the love of your life is not in fact an idiot.

Still. It's huge, and uneven, and were you not with Meulin right now, you would be identifying all of the worst ways in which it could kill you.

Instead she's wading straight into the shallow part before the water gets white, you're drafting the best way to offer her your cloak once she comes out and is freezing, and the Ψiioniic is getting ready to pluck her out of the water into the air, just in case.

(You've hit on the *perfect* way to offer, by the way, and that's by keeping the cloak on and just proposing you share. Trollmom's going to say I-told-you-so if she gets sick. She's going to say it while already making tea for her.)

"Look," she says, so you do, and what's caught her attention is a cluster of barely-visible finbeast eggs sheltered behind the two boulders that keep the water slow here. You can't tell if she's just discovered them now or she pulled you all the way here to show you the quietest part of the loudest part of the river.

"How old, do you think?"

She shakes her head. "I didn't think anything could spawn when it's this cold." To be clear, none of this *matters* in the immediate life sense, it's not like you're going to eat them (that bright green is not the color of an egg that can be eaten). It's curiosity.

"All dead?" the Ψiioniic offers.

She stares at his lips for a minute, moves hers like they had, and shakes her head again. "Let me find out!"

While she does whatever very, very ginger investigation she's set her heart to, you give her the space to focus, and focus on being her ears.

“...She loves you a whole fucking lot,” the Ψiioniic intones to your right, surprising you. The way he says it is a little like he’s worried you might be upset at the unintended implication that somehow you didn’t know, but also like you really, really need to know.

You smile, glancing his way, but he does not seem troubled by the fact that you weren’t, because he’s still watching as if balanced on the tip of a pin for the moment he’ll need to snatch her from the rapids. You absolutely do not think he’ll need to. You do, still, turn your eyes forward, so that he’s not the only one worrying.

“I love her a whole fucking lot.”

Meulin sticks her tongue out at you, and signs “*Slitherbeasts*.” You stick your tongue back, in the flickery fashion a reptile would.

Translating for the Ψiioniic, who is still learning, only occurs to you a second too late, but at the same moment that you’re about to open your squawk gaper he opens his—

“Hey, you know—” A full minute passes while you anticipate him collecting his thoughts. The first explosion should by all counts have burned him out but didn’t, but it still left a mark in his pan, and you’d be content to give the Ψiioniic hours on end in which to figure out how he wants to speak anyway. You used to be thrilled every time he opened his mouth for something other than a practical or defensive inclination that he needed to.

The feeling never faded. Now it’s just a little residual proud glow under the fact that you just like chatting with him, and hearing what he has to say.

The full minute passes and finally he elbows you in the ribs.

“Oh. ...I think I know.”

Either in the periphery of your vision or through the inches of air between you, you physically *feel* him relax, enough that you won’t turn your head to look for risk of ruining that for him. “Yeah, it’s that.”

“I know.”

You’ve said “I love you” a good four dozen times since he’s come here and that’s not including counting him in with crowds, but it’s hard to know when to push it. It’s worth it to make the point later tonight, when it won’t push the passive static in the air high enough to start worrying about shocking someone through the water.

For now you knock a horn against his in a little gesture of affection, and he knocks yours back and heads down the bank as Meulin jogs through shin-deep water to show you something in her hands.

vi. A structure that thrives on telling you that you don't understand, that we will never understand, that we weren't built to understand

Meulin is

Hm.

Meulin is dissecting a nut creature with more respect than you've ever seen any other troll have for life, particularly one that's already over. She's making a new leather punch for which she'll need a bone from its scamper pole, but first she's learning it, memorizing *this* nut creature's tendons and skeleton and insides as though it's a unique and beautiful thing apart from the hundreds, maybe thousands she's seen before.

(For most Alternian trolls, even wrigglers might learn to hunt. For Meulin, they need to.)

Later, she'll draw it. Right now, Meulin is wiping her hands on a cloth in her lap, then taking her sketchbook from your (clean) hands again and making large, swooping notes, lines that sometimes make sense to you and sometimes don't, because between the animal in three-dimensional space and the surface she has to render it in two she's seeing something you aren't. There are notes in her shorthand in corners, too, and in arrows pointed to joints and negative spaces, where the Disciple documents the thing in all its interlocking, pusher-just-beating parts

While the Signless tries to paint a sketch of her.

("Painting a sketch," you think immediately, is a wording she'd tease you for; that doesn't make any art sense- no, you're amending that. You'd tease you for it. She'd tell you you're worrying too much and not everything is semantics, but yeah, sketching with paint just to paint over it would be a little bit dumb. It was romantic, though. Very sweet.)

She doesn't always get to do this. When you were on your own, your trollmom did just fine, but Meulin has become a lot of how you subsist—both your family and the movement.

So this nut creature, sure, is going to become a fur, and three extra leather punches, and meat, just like every other nut creature before it, and sometimes she's even done something with the skull—most of it to sell; she'll or your trollmom will find a place in a market or on a well-trafficked sidewalk to spread them all out with a snuggleplane between the utilitarianized bits of its body and the ground. But tonight she has the time

to stop, and dissect, and give it more study. Every time, she finds some way to pay her respects. Usually, a piece of the prey gets set aside and later, when it's sanitary, consumed uncooked. Always, some small piece gets returned to the earth.

"But it all does eventually, anyway."

But she'd love, you know, to do this every time. Meulin's life is a study in nature like yours is in people, if the beginnings of your relationship with them hadn't been distinctly opposite.

She grew up surrounded by trees, by lizards and squeakbeasts she learned to bat at and play with and trap with her *lulus* still there to take the trophies to; learning to jab her claws out for fish in a running stream and actually catch something even though her *lulus* didn't understand, when teaching, that the scales would wedge under poor Meulin's wriggler skin the first few times. Learning to curl up to keep warm in her very wild un-drone-built cave through dark-season storms and to play hide-and-seek up in trees and keep very, very quiet when three miles away her *lulus* is being dragged from land all the way to the shore and she didn't hear it, for all her tracking skills that's the only way to know, when you're upwind from the smell of salt, until the hide-and-seek game's gone on too long and she can't seem to find you and you climb down and see the marks of your catmom's hard-fought struggle yourself.

She keeps the things she loves close to her, now. Where she can keep track of them. Even before you knew about her bad auricular clot, you started to learn and keep yourself where she always kept you on her left side.

She's a study in life, you think.

The way you are in politics, or blood, or you, or connections, or isolation, or disjointed pieces of it.

What Meulin gets is all of these things at once.

What she brings is a love not for crowds, but for people, when she hangs in the fringes, studying them. She brings that love in that same style even as she started to join you further in and spiral closer to crowds' centers, learned all the motions of comfort and public speaking in the small, person-to-person ways. She knows how to make a troll feel heard and how to be the second front-and-center head of the revolution, but Meulin loves people in the fact of their existence, in learning and observing them, in being able to bounce ideas about them back at you and decode a thousand mysterious things in posture and gait and body language and help the same people from the margins where no one needs to see her. Like how you're a writer, and she's an editor. You didn't know jack about this, but if you were published, and she was lowerblooded than you, her name wouldn't have to be on the book, apparently.

You know how to bandage a leg but she knows how to bandage it and dissect it. And both on a meowbeast as well as on a troll, you've seen her crack one's bone to mend it and just two minutes later have it soothed and purring, you've seen her put one down and she's willing to eat their meat as much as any other. (It's hard for her. Usually, she eats one piece, for that same respect for the beast, "so it won't go unused," and you remind her that it's okay not to use the rest. There's rarely shortage. You try to make sure there's never a need.)

She knew death to be a part of the life cycle. You thought this to be fundamentally wrong. You didn't cry over your dinners, but you didn't adore the fact, either.

She's a study in life and a votary of it, too. You're convinced.

Where you understand the pieces that are compatibly revolutionary and wriggler Kankri flung the rest away, Meulin starts to fill in the blanks. You'll never understand death.

You never believed that death could have meaning. You still can't, with trolls—she seems to mostly agree with that, where it comes to sacrifices or death in hard labor, cullings, military. Sacrifices, all of them. Sacrifices mean something. That's why death can't.

What you'd never reconciled was how everything can die anyway. How life can be about people living and no good will ever come of death and you are *convinced* of this, you have to be, no martyrs, and still somehow, someday, even in old age when the world is at peace, she is still going to die. It's where everything is going, and it's one of the biggest mysteries in your life, and you might have railed against every single death as not yet, too soon, not life enough if

At least to her, it makes sense.

Still, you wouldn't have thought to respect a nut creature's death.

She wraps it up in a carrying cloth, you draw the sketchbook off her lap to keep it clean. The bones are laid out in another, also gently and meticulously rolled up. You half-sign to ask if she'd like you to take a pouch, and she's already handing one to you, the one with the meat, so you take it with the utmost respect for any unliving thing you've held in your hands and stand, while she lays its acid tract and wasteshuttle tubes into the ground.

You can't identify the part that gets consumed raw here, but it's sanitary for her to do it now, with you holding the meat. You wait, time passes, and she stands.

"Time for us to go, love?" She watches the earth where the entrails lay, tests them with her shoe to see if they'll be secure long enough to integrate with it. You offer her your right hand.

"Mm-hm." She takes yours the moment she notices it's there, which is always just quick enough to surprise you, and you turn and kiss her cheek.

She kisses the shell of your ear as her revenge and you'd strike back further if you didn't both still have a very important job to be doing, so instead you turn back toward home where the bones will be sun-bleached and the meat cured.

"...So what was that... line, you were drawing, between the paw and the, um. The flank?"

Her step bounces once, the bones still somehow completely undisturbed in their pouch in her hand even as her hair goes flying. "Range of meowtion! He had a little inj-purr-y maybe two sweeps back, the tendon repaired itself funny."

Your eyebrows raise. "That's a long time for an injured nut creature to keep on scampering with a limp, isn't it?"

"Very." Yes. It always feels like winning some kind of award when you ask something that gets her to light up like that.

She loves the nut creature while it was alive and she loves the bag of bones in her hand. The former gets the kind of remembrance a great acrobat might earn if they find a rare place in Church history on the way home, Meulin successfully not bounding off the planet because you keep your fingers twined.

vii. *his voice grew incoherent.*

"I had a conversation a half a season ago, with a well-intentioned legislacerator. He asked me what he could do to further the cause, and I asked what he wanted to do, and he said apply the law more fairly. He wanted justice."

You're inside a run-down barn outside a city that no longer uses them. People sit on barrels and longgrass bales, a few psionics and/or their quadrantmates up in the rafters either for a better view or to make space. It's needed.

"I answered—I don't think justice comes from death,' because it's the only answer I had. It was a true one. I don't. Every single troll behind every single bloodpusher that stops pushing is a kind person cut short before they got there; an aborted capacity to change. It's a belief that a troll can become enough a detriment to society that we are better off without them now than we will be with them, healed, and saying that is not

asking forgiveness—it’s asking understanding. It’s asking that we accept the difficult truth behind the fact that I do not need to understand you to know you are a troll with value. It’s knowing that my life is worth something because I am a troll, and your life is worth something because you are a troll, and that if every person who hurt one or a thousand of us was killed in penance then my mother would have been dead before I was hatched and I don’t know if the fact that we’re here now makes things right. I just know that it makes the two of us alive. I just know that she’s helping more than she was hurting, and that if someone had gone vigilante and killed every single jade matron who’d killed more than a dozen of us for defects before we left the caverns then the next generation would have been trained and installed in their place, and I don’t know if another would have saved another kid like me, but I know that change would have been a long time coming.

“I know that tolerating violence, genocide, or slavery isn’t a price to pay. It isn’t one I’m fucking interested in; the night I preach *tolerance* for genocidal acts is the night I’ve been impersonated and the movement infiltrated and it’s time to move on, and trust your own inner voices better than whatever bullshit you’d hear me spewing. I just know that killing the people who’ve done it doesn’t heal us.

“It doesn’t heal anything in us to consider each other disposable.”

This one took tossing around a thousand times to write. Even now, you remember the phantom sensation of your grabmit stubs pressed to the bridge of your nose while the Ψiioniic explains what makes it sound right and what makes him feel wrong, or the Disciple gently suggests you shoosh your tits.

“Not because it— makes you worse. Not because it makes you ‘like them.’ But for fuck’s sake, because understanding that you never deserved to be hurt—and you didn’t, Allmother below, you didn’t, you never did—means understanding that you can *never earn* being written off. It’s not that you’re ‘good enough.’ Though you are. It’s not that you’re kind enough, or different enough, or above a line, it’s that you are a troll, and there is nothing you could do to deserve to hurt. That if you have done harm, there is no amount of harm you could do to yourself that will help a single troll it’s wounded, and so instead look forward, take a deep breath, do better.

“If you’re good because you are a troll, then nothing has power over you. Not power that lasts. Not power that is divinely intended, that is right, that maintains itself once they can’t hit us hard enough to keep us down anymore. If you are good because you are a troll, you need to prove nothing else.

“That’s why I can’t believe justice comes from death. Because they are a troll. And that—that fucking has to mean something, that’s all we have.”

It's okay to take a pause. The message needs its chance to sink in, anyway. Your chest has gotten tight.

In all your sweeps of speaking, of finally venturing into a world you had to learn to be terrified of and, once there, learn unabashed loud love for all over again, you've relearned how to cry in front of it in every way but one: To preserve your life, even when you know better and you know you've started wearing the color on your hood, the mutation-damning tears won't come.

That helps you, right now. You feared it would make you look like you're feeling less than you are, but you've been told it never does. It allows you to do things like this, and still keep speaking.

"Death can't be a shortcut. We can't let it. The idea of death as a solution to our problems is a manifestation of this weaponized, societally-intended fear of each other, fear of noncompliance, and in the end fear of all the sticky parts of understanding that the person next to you is as full a troll as you are and that is out of your control.

"That's okay. That's— it's fucking brilliant. I firmly believe that our biggest strength is that we are always going to be learning from each other and always going to be misunderstanding. I remember, Before, the biggest thing that feels different there is that we could step on each others' frondnubs all the fucking time, or we would get annoyed and spit unkind shit in someone else's face, and we stick around long enough to heal it because we lived to see tomorrow. That's how you begin to *know* people. That's how peace *works*.

"It's safe enough for me to fuck up—even permanently, not everyone on the planet kept me around, I've lost friends on both runs through the universe—because it's safe for me to be imperfect. It's possible for you and I to be friends before I understand you because there is an assumption that we will learn. It's possible to keep living under any fucking thing, to keep going in a place that wants to hurt or kill you, because we say no, we reject that, we will band together with each other in all our greatest traits and flaws and we will find another way.

"He asked 'What can I do from here,' and so I—" You sit down against the cloth-covered stack of splintered pallets on which you've set yourself, still able to see over your audience but closer to them now. The Disciple stays standing, her hands pausing when your words did. "—I said 'I don't know.'"

"I said it in part because I don't know if legislacration exists in a way that's fair. I think you can prevent deaths while you're there, mislay trails, argue for lessened violence. You can be a voice for kindness to plead to colleagues that your lower-blooded friends can't reach, but ultimately, I don't know if you're going to be able to stay there without

continuing to get blood on your hands or if the only answer is to step away. I don't know for certain if people will be safer or worse off if you do.

"I said it because I *didn't* know what *he, specifically* could do, and so let me be clear, the conversation didn't stop there. We spoke about permissions and privileges he had. How much he could get away with before his supervising officers caught up with him, how to have an exit strategy before then. How it matters monumentally to unlock a cell that was locked a moment ago, but more to keep the security team distracted, but more to give them enough food for half a night and a safehive to go to. I couldn't tell him ours, not while the uniform stays on. 'I don't know' does not mean 'let's not find out.'

"I said it mostly because I do not know how to fix this thing without you. I can't. One troll can't. We've seen the damage that tasking us with one voice to fix Alternia has done and I don't have a gander bulb toward fixing it by installing a different Empress. I said it because I know what better looks like, but I have no fucking clue what perfect is. Even in the Alternia Before, even when life was not defined by killing each other or shoving each other down or the trafficking, sale, and subjugation of as many people as you can, we were always working toward something. People were discontented there, Before; we weren't done.

"I had a vision yesterday."

You close your eyes, resting your palms facing up on your knees. The image can never come back to you in as full pieces as you had it in before you woke up, as in the seconds right after, but that's why you take such pains to write it down. That's why most of this is scripted.

Still, allowing a moment to dip back into the scene helps. Sometimes you need to try to remember. You thought it was theatrical, which is opposite your intent, but the Disciple says it moves through you like watching someone breathe out smoke and make pictures.

"Five kids gathered on a hivestem roof, a little dangerously close to daylight, but no one yet wanting to admit defeat and take the gathering inside.

"Maybe it was because something felt rebellious just about *being* there, you know? A wriggler doesn't stop wanting to be free and be a wriggler and fuck whatever rules are around them even if the rules are a thousand times looser." The soft laugh you give here is unplanned, it's just occurred to you to add: "I'm proof of that." Back into the script: "He's proof of that.

"But definitely in part because it felt like a conversation one just couldn't have inside something as banal as a hivestem. The yellowblooded boy, with his hair always grown out to approximately the length of a janitorial mop, had to live here every fucking day,

and this was something too special to take somewhere ordinary. It's not like the walls had auricular sponges. It's just that you're five sweeps old and this can be special if you choose to make it.

"The story of the night was runaways. Our friend the heiress, run off to be anything else but a leader. The only other public mutant I knew—this chubby-cheeked boy with a light in his eyes and beautiful, armspan-wide wings, thin as a buzzbeetle's and strong enough to carry him—regaling us with adventurous notions of leaving 'the machine' to rebuild whatever fantastical hidden forest-communities he could conjure up and do society all over again.

"She," you nod toward Trollmom, who gives a soft smirk and obliging little wave. The Πiioniic doesn't even like his wriggler name, let alone having his image tied to embarrassing stories spread to the public, but Trollmom very much likes her cameos, "had hopped up onto the low wall at the building's very edge, and begun to expound upon how she was never going to be a matron.

"And it occurred to me, when I woke up, that I spend every single second in the Alternia Before the safest I have ever felt. I spend every single second there able to breathe without question, to speak without caring in a way that I'm still teaching myself to." Another soft laugh, this one planned. "I was an unstoppable little shit. No, that doesn't matter, what matters is I remember that I spent every second there *hungry*.

"Never in the way that comes from missing food on your stomach. This is in the way that I stay awake for, in the way that spirals itself up into your chest until you *need* to speak or write or fight or scream until something gives, someone understands, it is *out*. Here's the thing: We were wrigglers, and we were not very wise wrigglers, and when any one of us got a little too earnest, the others laughed it off. The little Signless over there did not understand the concept of a runaway matron for a second. Rebuilding society all over again, that he understood, but here I am, a universe later, staring at this— this mirror of me, and going what the hell, why?

"And that's just it. I don't need to understand. The most beautiful place I have ever existed is one that he swore to sink every tool he had into and fix, and I don't know why, and I don't know how it would have looked in the end, but I know that we were not going to stop climbing.

"I know that peace, in all of its room for us to misunderstand and fumble but *listen*, to cross lines and stick frondpads in talkblasters but *speak*, was going to get us there. I know it is going to get us there. I know because there is something you need that someone else on this planet also needs desperately, and that there is something you understand that I don't, and *that's* what it is. That's what we are. Inventing ourselves and discovering each other, and we don't get to see an inch of that, we don't appreciate its smallest *sliver*, if kindness doesn't come first.

"I know you are worthy because you are a troll. I know I deserve to be here, deserve to live well, deserve to be happy, all of the same things as every one of you, because I am a troll. I know that it is difficult, that it should not be a question, that we deserve more than to work for what we already deserve, but I promise, I promise, I *promise* kindness is how we build it.

"I promise everything fucking begins when we recognize our potential, our *longing* to learn each other in kindness. I promise you everything fucking begins when we care."

viii. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

All it's ever been is bought time, stolen time, borrowed time.

It's been how many more lives and freedoms you can help steal back in twelve stolen sweeps.

You are cognizant of the fact that the Empire stole them away from you first, that it never owned them, that this was defense, that you are right, but if you stick on the "there was more time to be had and I lost it" train too long your pan slips and you are going to scream. Every night was a victory. Every night was something someone had won for you, usually someone else, and you've been using them very well and if you play this right there's still a chance.

("As long as a pusher keeps on pushing there's a chance. As long as there's life there is the capacity for change.")

("I've never believed in 'it could be worse.'")

You're in an imperial holding cell awaiting, presumably, your trial and execution. This isn't cynicism. This is the same way you would say that if you bleed in public, you are going to be culled—it's true, until you change it.

The cement you're sitting on is cold, and moving the pads of your grabmitt stubs against it to center yourself, you almost immediately find blood. It can't be a full night old. You try to swipe it off against a cleaner patch of the floor and find more blood, instead, probably the source of the one drop, and you finally bite the bullet to instead wipe it on your leggings (they've taken the cloak). You still feel it there, when you're done. You can handle a living troll's blood on you just fine, when you're stitching up skin or bandaging up a wound, you can handle it at least long enough to stay there, and finish working, and gulp for air about it later that night. This, though.

You find something else to think about while you can still breathe. The trial. (Gingerly, between two claws, you peel the fabric away from your skin and hold it up in a little peak.)

This cell is the third you've been shuffled into, not counting the scuttlewagons and boats as transport in-between. Not once since you've gotten here have you seen the rest of your family, and you rarely see another troll. When you do, it's always in a pair. You think that's because the Empire and the departments responsible for organizing your capture are afraid of your, and-you-quote (from the one guard who would speak to you), "silver tongue."

It's effective. Every time, even if you do manage to speak, it doesn't go further. And you've talked your way out of capture before, even when the people who help you are afraid—

But you've just never been captured like this. Centralized imperial military, coordinated on all sides, not local law enforcement waiting for backup and transport or independent groups cashing in on a bounty. Your imprisonment is coordinated with the full richness of resources the Empress herself is willing to spend on you to draw from, and she has spent plenty very freely. You're aware that you wouldn't be paired with *these* guards, out of the thousands on Alternia, if they weren't very effectively afraid of each other.

("Remember that you have a choice," you tell them, every time. And then: "Remember that the one you make with me doesn't have to be the one you make tomorrow.")

A trial, though, is catastrophically different from a single pair of guards.

A trial can expect thousands in attendance. You know that your sentence is already decided and that no recorded lowblood has successfully plead their case here before, not in the capitol, not for charges of treason. You know that you can expect to speak to His Honorable Tyranny, but if Her Imperious Condescension is in attendance—and not to call yourself special, every rebel who has ever lived has deserved the same audience, but you sincerely hope she will be—it's her mind you have to change. You know more about her than about him, but should be preparing to appeal to both.

What you don't want to do is spark violence to save your life. You'll need to address the crowd, you'll need to do something that is meaningful and matters and for the sake of impressions, for clarity of meaning and to visibly stand by the truth that every one of them, as a troll, is more important than any position of power—it needs to be clear that they matter to you as much as the Empress or His Honorable Tyranny does. That's critical. The amount of time you spend speaking to each is a message in itself and you are painfully aware of this as you consider how to spend your painfully little time.

This isn't a case where you get to say "tell me a little more about you, first." You don't like assumptions, but at least beyond the broadest of strokes, you won't be making any, and you can't bring yourself to find fault in remembering and rebuilding the arguments that work.

You know, for example, that so much of highblooded Alternian identity is tied to power. You know how to dismantle the concept of power as a thing that anyone *needs*, and how to be gentle, how to facilitate someone to the understanding that an attack on power isn't an attack on you. The theory doesn't have to be perfect, the revolution doesn't have to be won tonight; you only have to say things that are philosophically sound, that leave Alternia with enough if you leave it, that leave it unwounded, and that buy you time.

You only need to say things that guide them enough and leave it unwounded. Remind them the tools they have, remind them that those don't belong solely to you. Leave the planet that knows, that is waiting so achingly, that is standing on the edge of a precipice and if it only makes the leap *will* heal, just ready, enabled to do what they already can.

Everything comes back to that.

As for the appeal for your life, the chance to buy time, the work you can keep doing now if only someone hears you, you can build the rest.

And so you know what you're going to say, mostly, when another guard you haven't met enters to yank you to your stumbling feet. You know your opening lines as a second trades the shackles around your wrist for a far more visually pathetic rope. One steps in front of you, one steps behind, and you spend the short, but clumsy walk down the hall in two places at once

"Please remember that tonight you have a choice. Tell me what you're up against and I will problem-solve with you. Tell me what comes down on our heads if we choose another way this ends." The trial begins with the detailing of your charges, and you may not speak during them. You know how you're going to open. You know that it matters that once you start speaking, you do not stop.

You know that treason is defined, colloquially, as action against the Empire, and that the Empire is only the constructed amalgamation of people and the invisible walls we confine ourselves too under that name, there's the half that means *us*, and the half made of nothing at all. Everything you have ever done has been in love for all of us. That's why it isn't treason. That's why allowing the Empire to collapse inward on itself, to keep crushing the people it always has and to watch quietly until one night you quietly waste away is the worse crime; that's your way in.

There has been silence for seven stumbled steps, and twelve, thirteen seconds.

Fourteen, fifteen. “I want to understand.” At first you wonder if the rustling behind you might be a shifting in posture that you can’t see, if you had learned enough that facing them you would recognize anger, or recognition, or the sensation of being suddenly disarmed. The slimmer end of a club rams into your spine head-on and it would’ve taken more than you have not to scream. That’s okay. They get to see you hurt. They get to see that this is real.

You’re jerked forward by the rope before you can be sure you’re still upright, but somehow you are, and you remember composure. *It’s okay, sweetgrub*. Gander bulb lids closing, enough of a breath to pull yourself near upright, a little more of a healthily dark shade, you think, to your face. “It’s okay,” you say, before the doors open. “It’s okay if this hurts later. Remember that you’re going to keep making choices. Remember that the one you make with me doesn’t have to be the one you make tomorrow.”

That your words garner no outward acknowledgment at all isn’t the end of them. The troll leading you methodically turns a complicated lock, six consecutive motions, and then the doors open.

There isn’t a trial.

There is a jut.

There’s Meulin and that means she hasn’t recanted and your horrible, die-for-each-other-but-live-for-the-movement-first heart (diamond, club, spade, the light and fluttery thing that moves around inside you, the space between the tendons and the muscles bone and blood) is *relieved*, of all things, because it means she didn’t recant, it wasn’t horrible enough for her to recant. You should feel guilt about that. You’re both going to die.

It means she still thinks recanting would be worse.

You are in love in a way you don’t think any iteration of you, in a thousand universes, could understand.

If you stay here and in love and don’t think about anything else the Empire can’t pull the proverbial fucking rug out from under you, but then somewhere out there across the dirt, closer to the Empress than to her, the Ψiioniic retches.

The last time you said “I love you” to him was the night before your capture. You can live with that. To Meulin, the Disciple, it was— Rift’s Carbuncle below, it was shouted as you were being pulled apart.

With your eyes, you find him. Of course, you find him, Meulin nodding sadly in his direction to guide you to him— sick, and dosed on suppressants and sedatives and some cocktail of things that’ve made him barely here but the Empress— *manicured claws on his skull*— takes his head and grips it like a plush in a mechanical prod-and-grab machine, and forces it down toward you. You debate smiling. You won’t risk the interpretation that it’s about him.

You search, frantic, for your mother—the last time you said it to her was the night before, too, and it’s been... three? Four nights since? Your vague, slightly concussed notion of the passage of time is not to be trusted, but you’re guessing by the emptiness of your acid tract.

It’s right when your eyes land on her that the rope around your wrists is yanked forward and you walk after it. Your eyes stay locked on her form as you remind the troll lifting the heated irons from the fire with heavy tongs, and the one closing your hands into fists and gripping them roughly, at arm’s length in front of you, that they have a choice.

(“I only asked you to try. I only asked you to try. *I only asked you to fucking try.*”)

If it’s up to you, this is where the history books let your part of the story end.



Time is a Winding River

Skyeec2

Time is a Winding River – Skyeec2

The Handmaid

'Time is a winding river and your existence is bullshit. So you deal with it.'

Time is a winding river.

It has many little offshoots and creeks that will eventually dry up and fade away into nothing, not even worth considering when the main body of the river continues to flow as it always does; ever onwards towards its predisposed destination.

You think that's bullshit.

You let everyone around you know just how bullshit you think that is.

Which means you let the Cueball that is "raising" you know exactly what you think of his attitude and opinion towards time and the continuum of it all. He, of course, mocks you for your "childish" thoughts in comparison to his boundless knowledge but that doesn't stop you from thinking that each and every time he starts spewing words about destiny and pre-decided upon paths that he's just pulling a load of bullshit from the depths of his empty, white head.

You know time. You know it better than he does.

You know time. You have to know it to break it, shatter it, make it do what you want of it in ways no one else had ever thought possible. It's what you do, it's what you were created to do.

And that gall of him to think you'll just lay down and fall into whatever set of decisions and paths he and his "Lord" want of you is beyond laughable, it's disgusting.

So you ignore him. At basically every occasion.

And it annoys him to no end.

And they can't kill you for it. Killing you would be a blessing, a relief, it's what you want so they can't threaten you with that when you misbehave and ignore orders and suggestions.

Which you do often by taking time into your own hands like you're supposed to and instead of contributing to the main body of the river, you ignore the ever-flowing continuum for something infinitely more appealing and enjoyable to experience. Even if you can only experience it yourself from the side lines.

That's enough for you.

Well it isn't but there's no point being upset or angry about it when you're on your own. No, it's best to direct those emotions to someone deserving of being on the receiving end of them instead of keeping them trapped inside your own head with no outlet to project them at.

Keeping anger to yourself is just stupid. Being angry on your own is just stupid.

You're not stupid. You're not doing that.

What you are doing, is watching one of the creeks you'd decided to intervene in.

You've set this one into motion and now you're going to sit back and watch it play out.

The main body of the river did not have a very kind outcome for the trolls you've been observing on and off through its flow of time, which was both rude and awful so you were going to ignore it as long as you could. Which, considering that you could ignore the rules of time however you wished by breaking them in new ways and the fact that you had a limitless life span to figure out new and interesting ways to do so, was a very, very long time.

You had so much empty time to fill however you wanted to.

And what you wanted right now was to watch the lives of this band of outcasts and rebellion sowers go about their lives together now that Really Red Tiny One wasn't going to be strung up and executed by some unhappy Religious Clown asshole.

Well, actually they're being a bit boring right now what with their quadrant-blurring antics and the like, right now so you might just skip ahead into the future a bit to see if you can find a more interesting viewpoint and everything is on fire.

You promptly say 'fuck that' to that conclusion and tear yourself a way into a time somewhere between the disgustingly affectionate quadrant-blurring antics and the fiery doom of something having gone wrong and find yourself somewhere much more interesting.

Your favourites have somehow gotten themselves to survive long enough to meet up with Winged Pretty Boy, and it looks like this time around he's gotten himself a collar made out of clown teeth scars, which certainly is something you've never seen before. Probably because you tend to pass Winged Pretty Boy over for the more interesting figures that are Spider Pirate and... the other one... whatever he was, it's unimportant. The point is that your favourites have met up with him and there looks to be an argument breaking out between then

and Winged Pretty Boy and fuck yes. You have chosen a great place to pop back in on the timeline.

Sparky is shouting at Winged Pretty Boy, Winged Pretty Boy is shouting back, Really Red Tiny One is trying to calm them both down, Predator Big Cat is looking between the three of them like she's as ready for a fight to break out as you are, though for different reasons of course, and Caregiver looks to be sporting the beginning of a headache.

You hope a fight does break out, that would be so much fun to watch.

It probably won't because you're sure that Sparky is more arguing with Winged Pretty Boy because Really Red Tiny One can't quite look at the other mutant without his eyes stalling on the ring of hideous looking scars around his throat. Also you know for a fact that Sparky agrees somewhat with Winged Pretty Boy; shared experiences giving them similar mindsets and all but fuck.

You would really like to see a fight break out though. Just think of how dramatic that would be!

You're starting to wish that you had something to munch on while you watch all this drama unfold before your eyes when your whole mood takes a turn for the worst as Cueball makes an appearance.

Asshole can't even let you enjoy the unfolding drama the way you want to without coming in to check that you're going to do what he wants, which is bullshit because neither you nor he would exist if you hadn't done what he wanted at some point in your future so why can't he just leave you be to experience the closest thing you have to an actual existence?

Fucking asshole Cueball. What does he want now?

"You can't possibly be at this again, can you?"

Yes? So what if you are? It's not as if any time you waste actually means anything does it? Not when you can just tear your way into whenever the hell you want to. Or does his limitless knowledge gloss over that little glaring detail?

"It's foolish to see these timelines past where they diverge from the main timeline," and he's fucking ignoring you again. Even though you both know for a fact that he can hear every single, tiny thing you've ever thought to yourself. Asshole Cueball. *"Even more so when you further them past the point where they should have collapsed in on themselves from their lacking relevance."*

Again... so what if you are? What's he going to do about it? Is he going to kill you? Is he going to lock you in your room like a child refusing to do her chores

before she goes out to play? Is he going to lock your powers away? Tell Big Bad Skull Man on you like a little snitch?

You'd like to see him try.

"I don't need to do any of that. For you've already lost your interest in these pathetic lower life forms and whatever nonsense they get up to with their fleeting lives."

... Fuck.

"The timeline is already starting to fall apart without your attention on it, isn't it? It isn't stable enough to support itself this far away from the main timeline."

Fuck.

"Even if you wanted to put it back together and hold onto it longer, which we both know you don't, you'll just be acting as the voyeur once again. Always watching from the sideline, never able to interact in ways that would be anything that even ghosted as satisfactory, aren't you?"

Maybe you like being the voyeur? Had he never thought of that? Fucking asshole Cueball coming in and ruining a whole timeline, a whole new scenario and situation with so many off-branching possibilities, for you.

"I believe we both know the answer there."

... Fucker.

"I will see you after you sow the Seer's death into the Clown's primitive scripture, you have another assignment waiting for you afterwards."

Of course you do, you have nothing but assignments, task after task after task with nothing in between and you're alone again.

Fucking Cueball just leaving like that, fuck him.

And the timeline you were watching is gone too; collapsed in on itself before it got to the juicy part like they always do. Enough to catch your interest by never enough for you to really enjoy it like you want to.

This is also bullshit.

Your whole existence is bullshit.

...

You suppose you should get to work then, not like you have anything better to do then ensure the river of time flowed like it was supposed to.



Bury Your Friends

Names Die While Legends Linger

Skyeec2

-

The atmosphere immediately after an altercation with the Highbloods was never a pleasant one to experience, Rufioh would readily confirm that much. It was always so... so bittersweet; no victory, no matter how important it was to the rebellion, could ever replace the ache of missing trolls; lives cut away long before they should have been, quadrants and allies wiped away thoughtless and without even the opportunity for that final closure, not helped by them being unable to bury their dead and mourn over everything lost to them. The Highbloods wouldn't have allowed them to return for the bodies and attempting to bring them back with them was... a death sentence in itself.

So, Rufioh decided he would try to bring them closure however he could.

It was easy to gather up those grown and raised on Cavalreaping, those born into the role like he'd been and given no other choice for what they could have been, as with all of those too low on the spectrum to matter, to breathe the idea into the ear of one and watch it spread through those of them that had remained this long until when he left the camp at the first sight of moonlight it was in accompaniment of at least a dozen other trolls. There'd been more of them once, Rufioh could remember when the rebellion had been made up almost entirely of those that had left with him, unwilling to live and die by the Highbloods' rule any more, that point was long passed though, they'd been cut down to less than a fraction of what they had once been.

But, Rufioh still thought it was a good thing that so many of them would still come together to do this with him, to remember those that had fallen and try to give them a bit of proper closure the only way they knew how to. Traditions, important things to keep close to yourself, even if they were born from awful and horrible things.

Before, they'd used this tradition to bring peace to those that had gone missing on patrols or been killed by beasts for food. Now... now it was being used for those culled by Highblood claws.

A pretty big difference, or at least it was to Rufioh.

But the tradition was finding new uses in the current circumstances, as different as they were, so he supposed he should be at least a little pleased about that? Maybe? Just the tiniest bit?

He was more than pleased about sticking it to the Highbloods that thought their way was the only way to do things at least, taking a tradition born out of the endless need to keep moving and leaving those that couldn't keep up behind

because of the risk of one's own skin away from the claws of those that thought themselves better than they were was something Rufioh would encourage until his last breath.

Especially tonight, with numerous of what Rufioh could only call losses despite Mindfang's and even Darkleer's assurances otherwise. Losing over half of the battle party would never be an equal trade for some inconvenience to the Highbloods, not to Rufioh at least. But then again, he supposed that was just another difference between himself and the two colder-running individuals that were supporting his rebellion.

Rufioh refused to think of any of the trolls they'd lost as a 'necessary statistic'. And that was, he supposed, what the tradition was about at its core.

Remembering, grieving, acknowledging that there'd been a troll once that there just wasn't anymore. Names etched into bone and buried with the hopes that those attached to them might find some semblance of peace through the action.

There were barely more than a dozen of them at the moment, but they'd do their best to give peace to all the trolls they'd lost since they were able to perform it at all.

Or... there were barely a dozen that Rufioh remembered performing the tradition with at different points in the past and one new face that he couldn't quite recall, a young troll, not even starting his adult molt with horns that branched off similarly to antler-hoofbeast horns.

"Don't think I've uh, seen you at one of these before?" The questioning tilt of his voice was unintentional, but the curious cock of his head wasn't. He inspected the young troll closer, taking in tired, heavy eyes and hollow cheeks, clothes that didn't look like they were fitting quite as they should be and a piece of cloth tied around his neck with a sign resulting a barkbeasts pawprint. "New?"

The young troll nodded his response, not quite looking at Rufioh, which was, unfortunately, something he was dealing with more and more often.

"Cool." Rufioh gave the troll what he hoped was a welcoming and encouraging smile. "Ever done one of these before?"

A shake this time.

"That's alright, gotta be a uh, a first time for everything." He softened and gestures towards where the others are all gathering to get started. "And as long as you've got a steady hand to carve the names then you'll uh, you'll pick it up in no time."

“Yeah unlike Nervous-Stubfronds Nitram here!” Rufioh didn’t bother to hold himself back from rolling his eyes at Adosja’s cackling add-on, turning his head to give her a look born of long familiarity and deep-rooted comradery.

“I’ve told you I can’t uh, can’t help it!” He shot at the other Cavalreaper, watching the way the young troll looked between them both with wide, unsure eyes. “They just shake sometimes!”

“Don’t worry about Mister ‘one name to every four’, kid.” Adosja strode over to wrap a battle-marred muscular arm around the young troll’s shoulders, jostling him just the slightest amount. “Stick with me and we’ll have you carving bone like a proper survivor in no time.”

“I can carve pretty good like,” the admission was small, quiet and muttered to the ground below them and Rufioh wasn’t gonna have that.

“What was that?” He asked, keeping his voice kind enough for the kid to know he was just teasing. “Sorry, couldn’t uh, couldn’t hear you over Adosja’s ego there.”

“Like you’re one to talk!”

It worked well enough though, got the kid to chuckle at them at least.

“I’m pretty good at carving,” he repeated, louder and actually talking to them this time. “We used to practice when we had time.”

“Well uh, practice does make perfect after all.” Rufioh ignored the scoffed ‘usually’ that came from Adosja to turn to where the others were waiting for them so they could divide up the work and get started. “Come on uh,” a pause as he turned back to the kid, one horn lifting skywards as he continued. “Forgot to uh, to ask what your name was. I meant to do that somewhere uh, somewhere in there.”

“Pyionr. Pyionr Luffit.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rufioh Nitram and that’s-“

“Adosja Verdes.” She finished before Rufioh was able to, grinning impishly down at Pyionr. “Look at you, just got here and you’re already on first name basis with The Summoner.”

“Oh shove off.” There wasn’t any heat in his voice though, which was good because Adosja simply responded by sticking her tongue out.

At least the kid didn’t look like he was walking into headfirst The Grand Highblood’s horrid and vile clutches anymore, a definite plus there.

They were accepted into the group of waiting Cavalreapers as if they were returning to where they should have been all the time, slipping into empty space with ease and being integrated into conversation with a seamlessness born of experience. Pyionr was accepted as easily simply for the fact that he was there, without thought or care of whether he had been trained from pupation for the life of a Cavalreaper or not; he was there and he wanted to participate, why send him away?

Names are given out soon enough, passed around from a list of those they recalled and added to whenever they thought of someone they'd almost missed.

Rufioh, who's apparently been decided to be the butt of some joke today, was given Arniya Desmen to start off with, amongst the snickers and chuckles from those who'd been around long enough to know just how long he'd end up spending on the one name.

"Don't worry if you're not too good to start off with," one of the oldest was telling young Pyionr, smile kind and showing none of his own almost death at the claws of an infection that had sprouted from a wound during the last fight. "There's no way you'll take as long as Nitram does."

"Hush some of us are uh, are trying to concentrate." Rufioh kept his head down, focus entirely on the bone in his hand as he started on that first 'A'. He didn't hear the kid's answer but it must have been a good one since it got a few well-meaning snickers from those around him.

"Who the fuck was Prusan again?" Adosja questioned as she worked, barely needing to look at her hand to get the letters looking pristine and perfect in their form. "I don't remember that name."

"Wow great uh, great job at that Verdes."

"Do *you* remember them Nitram?"

"Not that uh, not that name no, but that's not the point."

"Oh my -"

"I think they were a bronze?" Their banter was cut off by one of the others gathered there, a younger troll with hair matted and gathered into a careless bun, horns a straight line until they jutted forward and split either way. "Weren't they the one with the... I wanna say horizontal horns that curved down? Was that them?"

"Nah that was Sylyyx." Adosja waves off, bringing her hand up to her face as she thought, giving Rufioh time to focus on starting in making the 'n' he was up

to actually look like a 'n'. "Sylyyx was a tough little bint that wouldn't take shit from anyone."

There's a murmur of agreement from everyone, that sounds right for her.

"... wait," that came from somewhere to Rufioh's other side, on a voice he'd only heard a few times before. "Was that Daggerface?"

"FUCKING YEAH IT WAS!" Adosja then proceeded to break into mad cackles, loud and obnoxious and entirely herself. "Fuck no wonder he preferred Daggerface, the cheeky barkbeast." She then returned to work, completely content with knowing who's name she was working on.

"... why was he called 'Daggerface'?" Rufioh blinked at the quiet, hesitant question, lifting his head to look at Pyionr.

"Right you wouldn't know," Adosja hummed, turning to look at Rufioh. "How about our fearless leader tell you? Leave the rest of us to actually get some work done."

"You just want to uh, to hear me talk. You can uh, you can admit it, you're amongst friends." Rufioh ignored the new series of chuckles that got, focusing on Pyionr who was starting to look like he might regret having asked the question. "When we found him and his claud he was uh, was biting down on two daggers to use as uh, to use as weapons. Cause his, his hands had been broken by a bunch of Ceruleans that didn't uh, didn't like that he wasn't just going to stand back while they uh, while they bothered his moirail."

"He was a mad barkbeast, fucking sick as."

"...that uh, that too I guess." Rufioh added on, rolling his eyes as Adosja made a show of placing down her first finished name and starting on another before Rufioh had even finished the first name of his one.

"Oh." Pyionr blinked, looking down at the name he'd almost finished himself. "What about this guy? Poluxi Actias?"

"He and Adosja used to yell at each other across uh, across camp to prove who was the loudest." Rufioh gave the answer so seriously that Pyionr almost believed it, if not for Adosja's snorted disagreement behind him.

"If anyone screamed with him it was you at those planning meetings." She rolled her eyes, nudging Pyionr lightly. "Poluxi let everyone know when he wasn't happy."

"Yeah he uh, he did," Rufioh agreed with a chuckle. The number of times he'd have to stop and pause things just because of the gold were too numerous to

count. “He was good sort though. I could uh, could always depend on him to be uh, to be honest with me when I needed it.”

The kid nodded and they all lapse into a comfortable quiet as they work, the night air filled with only the sound of knives on bone.

Rufioh finally finished with the first name he’d been given and hummed a proud noise to himself, looking it over once more just to make sure it was up to stuff. Yeah, he thought that Arniya would have been happy with that one. One of the dying breed that was trolls that didn’t get caught up in that whole The Summoner excitement, lost to a clown with a particularly vicious agenda.

Hopefully this would help them, and all they’d lost, find some kind of peace. Rufioh could only hope.

If not for them then for him. Being the one to lead so many trolls to their deaths was hard enough, he needed to do something to help make their after-existence easier on them.

He looked up as he was reaching for another bone, eyes landing on the kid. The young troll was unusually still, limbs holding a stiffness Rufioh recognized as holding things back.

He shifted to sit next to the kid, nudging him gently with his elbow. “What’s up?” He kept his voice low, an indication that the rest of the group should continue with their own work and give the illusion of ignoring Rufioh talking to the young troll.

“Karsya...” the kid’s voice was tight, barely held together.

Rufioh looked between the kid’s hidden face and the empty bone in his hands, putting two and two together.

“Someone you knew?”

“She... held them off while we escaped.” Oh. Pyionr lifted a hand up to rub roughly at his face and Rufioh waited for him to compose himself enough to finish. “I didn’t, didn’t really know her but she... she stayed so that the rest of us could leave and...”

Rufioh waited a few breaths to see if Pyionr was going to say anything more, sighing heavily when it seemed like he wasn’t. “I’m sorry to hear that,” and he was, it was genuinely pumper-shattering to hear tales of those lost in the efforts to protect someone else, even complete and total strangers. “She sounded like a fierce, courageous troll.”

The kid nods, stiff and jerky but it’s enough.

“That’s what we’re out here for isn’t it?” He mused, seeing the kid’s ear flicker towards him from the corner of his eye. “To remember everyone the way they uh, they deserve to be, and give them a bit, a small bit of peace however we can.”

“... yeah.”

“Tell me more about where you came from,” Rufioh offered, picking up a new bone of his own to start working on. One of the others throwing a name at him thoughtlessly. “And how she got you all out. I’m sure she’d uh, she’d appreciate her story being told.”

Pyionr offers a shaky, wet smile and launches into the story of where he’d started and the Olive that had gotten him and the rest of their small number away from the culling about to end them.

Rufioh listened with an eager ear, adding the proper engagement whenever he could. Yeah this was what this whole tradition was all about, memories and sharing the fact that these trolls had been alive once, had lived and done things worth remembering.

And maybe, just maybe, if this rebellion could only hold out and continue the good work it was doing, if maybe there was a day they could stop burying the names of those lost to the Highblood’s uncaring cruelty... maybe all these loses would be worth it.

Rufioh doubted it, but he had to hope for better days.

-

You are The Summoner.

That's the only name that really matters anymore so that's all you'll call yourself by.

Your true name, your first name, the name you chose for yourself upon your first pupation trying to change what your lusus had called you into a word you could attach your identity to and carried with you for most of your life, it's been lost to you now. It has been far too long since you've used it for yourself, since anyone else's used it in reference to you. Mindfang had preferred your title, most everyone had preferred the name you'd fashioned for yourself at the beginning of your rebellion from whispers and rumours. Except for... but he'd left long before the end of things, running when it had all started to take a turn for the worst for all of you; the number of trolls that returned from missions grew lesser and lesser, supplies started to dry up, allies disappeared and turned against you and... You hadn't blamed him, couldn't blame him for it because maybe... maybe Rufioh Nitram would have done the same thing, at one point in time.

But that didn't really matter did it? It didn't matter that 'Summoner' wasn't your true name because Rufioh Nitram wasn't important in this story. Besides, he'd already departed this world, had abandoned and left it when Mindfang had urged him to drive his lance clean through her torso, words honeyed sweet and comforting in his skull even as her breath grew wet and horrid with the blood in her lungs, urging him forward, onwards, *you can do it I want you too...*

Rufioh Nitram had perished then, his matesprits body cradled in his arms and bleeding out from the merciful blow of his lance straight through her pumper.

It was The Summoner's turn today.

The Summoner's battle was lost. Your way, your rebellion, over and the Highbloods all the more enraged for your part in it, for the lives of theirs that you brought to a sudden and abrupt end with all of the care they had ever shown you and yours. They were demanding your execution now; you knew that it was coming and the most care you could give that notion was the singular breath of relief in that it wouldn't be... wouldn't be Darkleer firing the arrow at you. You'd had more than enough of quadmates culling each other for the perigee. You would consider it a small kindness from the cruel world you existed in, small yes, miniscule at best, but one you were more than a little glad for all the same.

Currently, you were awaiting your escorts, alone in your cell with no window to allow light or fresh air in, leaving you cut off from the world but for the barest hint of dull, weak light that managed to creep it's way under the door and allowed you just enough light to barely be able to see some of the details of the room you were in with your warm-blooded eyes. It's nothing impressive, the only thing of any kind of interest around you being the markings left by prior occupants and prisoners of the Highbloods; claw marks of varying lengths and desperation, some steady and deliberate in the walls as trolls attempted to guess at the passing of time and others messier, frantic on the floor, detailing their final desperate struggle to deny their death, to escape the fate that was awaiting them at the hands of the Highbloods dragging them from the safety and solitude of the cut-off, isolated room. You swear you could smell where terror and hopeless resignation had sunken so deep into the freezing stones of the walls it had permanently stained the still, stale air around you.

You have nothing to do in here, nothing to keep your hands or thoughts busy so you can allow yourself to think, to think and dwell on things for far longer than you've ever let yourself at any other time because there was always something more important to focus on, some plan or strategy, some big thing that required all your attention and you just didn't have the time. But now, now you don't know when the Highbloods will come to drag you out of your room before the remaining infestation your army hadn't managed to cull from the face of Alternia.

So you have the time to do it, you have the time, the opportunity, to think.

...

You can't recall a time Mindfang ever used your true name, at least not before she'd been guiding you through the motions that would finally release her from her mortal coil, which is more the pity because you would have liked to hear it in her voice, in her actual voice and not the echoing, all-consuming facsimile of it in your skull or the wet, breathless choking of it with her colour in her lungs. It would have sent you spiralling, free-falling into the reddest of feelings for her to finally know that she'd seen you as more than The Summoner, more than the image of a general in her seeing-orb, more than the matesprit that would take her life from her.

You think, you would have liked if she saw Rufioh instead of The Summoner, even if it was just the once. Maybe you could have come to know the troll underneath Mindfang's smooth taking and weaving web of influence and half-truths.

... But maybe that was just the fantasy of a wriggler that still wanted so much to be wholly seen and not found lacking despite his... abnormalities.

It didn't matter, the past was dead and gone and Mindfang had only cared for Summoner, not Rufioh. Rufioh... hadn't even been a blip on her radar. You could admit to that.

But Darkleer... he'd given a damn about Rufioh.

He'd taken your name and kept it close to his pumper, breathed it from his mouth like it was something important, something deserving to be spoken into the air and allowed to hold attention and regard in their lives. Darkleer... he'd ensured that you knew that there would always be time to just be Rufioh when the expectations of The Summoner grew too much for your ill-prepared shoulders to handle, he gave you time and a place where you could put aside the clown's movements, the mounting body control of your army, the looming knowledge that this was useless, futile, doomed, and you could just... you could just be Rufioh for a few minutes. Rufioh who loved the lusus that taught him to fly, Rufioh who had hid his mutation even though his shoulders and wing stubs ached from being bound down so tightly and for so long, Rufioh who'd worked endlessly, tirelessly, just to make things the tiniest bit easier for whoever came in after he left.

He'd let you be a troll when you'd started to forget what that was like, you were so grateful for that. So very grateful to have had that for the brief period of time he'd stopped being terrified of stepping out of place and earning your culling ire and you'd let yourself trust the turncoat's traitorous pumper long enough to relax into his regard. Darkleer had liked your name, had liked speaking it, saying it when nobody else did and keeping it like it was something precious, something that was wholly his and wasn't that such a pathetic thing? To hold so much pride in being given something so small, so minute and insignificant?

But then you'd... you'd felt the same at being given his name in return. A name kept by monsters and stripped away from him like so much of him as an individual troll until he was nothing more than another cog in the Empire's churning machinery.

Which was a shame because Horuss was such a good name.

You'd used it when he'd left, just like he'd used Rufioh when he'd requested forgiveness, soft and quiet and directed towards the earth with a difference that turned your stomach and made you all too aware of where you both started out. But you'd already long forgiven him; forgiven him when his brows refused to unfurrow and he started to walk like a hunted creature at the edges of camp again, forgiven him when you'd found his makeshift hive dark and abandoned like he'd only been a ghost you'd imagined into creation to help you deal with everything and...

Horuss had tried, he'd tried to get the words together to make you understand, stuttering and stammering, losing his words amongst sharp clicks and noises of panic and distress you hadn't been able to ease because you couldn't... you couldn't let yourself touch him, to shush and calm him, reassure that he could get out the words that would tear apart your trust in him, shatter you both and you'd wanted... You'd wanted to protect that bit of yourself that was still Rufioh and not The Summoner so you didn't. You held yourself stiff and still and waited he petered off, Horuss' voice dying in the expansive space between you both as you did your best to hold both Rufioh and Summoner in your head at once.

Because while The Summoner's decision should have been to put an end to the turncoat, the deserter, to stop him from leaving and potentially leading the Highbloods back to them in order to garner favour or forgiveness in proving his worth and value to them or any other logical reason that would have made Summoner well-justified in culling Darkleer.

But Rufioh...

You'd let him go, you couldn't ask him to stay with you, couldn't ask him to potentially watch you die even if it would have soothed something in you to have him there to watch your back and potentially die for you in turn but... but he deserved more than that.

You wanted more for him than that, he deserved to have his ending separated from the Highbloods that had controlled his life and while The Summoner should have brought the Expatriate to hell and culled him for his desertion, Rufioh couldn't do that to Horuss.

You hadn't asked him to stay. You hadn't impaled him for daring to leave.

No.

Instead you'd reach out and up, not too much since he was still directing his whole form towards the dirt beneath your feet in a futile hope to disappear into it as you knew he was, to touch him. To bring his forehead to yours and in light of moons not yet risen you'd wished him the best of luck and a kind death when if eventually came for him. You'd thought yourself strong, believed that you'd be able to bare this with all of The Summoner's fortitude and solidity but then... Then he'd slumped against you with a noise that sounded so much like this was physically hurting him that Rufioh was brought low by it. You had a stray thought, wild and momentary, that perhaps he'd falter, that Horuss' resolve would shatter like so many panes of colour glass. But he hadn't, he was far stronger, far weaker, than that and oh how you had pitied him then, pitied the both of you.

He'd left you standing there, alone and overlooking an army preparing for what was more than likely gearing up to be their final few nights of existing and you... you hadn't been able to watch him go, you couldn't bring yourself to do that to yourself. So you'd tucked Rufioh away then, he wasn't needed with the Highbloods drawing closer and closer and a collection of Lowbloods looking to him for guidance and reassurance that this wasn't worthless, wasn't meaningless, was actually and truly meant something.

Rufioh may have been the one to scale the hill to confront Horuss for his decision to leave, but it was The Summoner and Expatriate that took their separate ways down.

The Highbloods had descended upon the camp within the next few nights, meeting an army prepared for them and with nothing to lose but the very breath in their lungs and the very rights to existence they were all fighting so desperately for, freedom and equality and the rights that should have been theirs as much as it was the Highbloods despite how much warmer they were than the others. The Highbloods may have been the ones to emerge victorious from the battle but there was no denying the blood it had cost them, a small victory, hollow and spiteful amidst a tremendous loss, but one you were going to keep close and warm in your pumper up until they stole the very life from you. It was nothing and it was petty but it was wholly yours in this story, an achievement you would be proud to carry to your grave.

The Summoner – Rebel Scum and Culler of Clowns

You'd been captured at that battle, captured instead of killed there as a warrior amongst your comrades and companions, brought hundreds of miles in order to be made an example of beyond the entire Empire like The Sufferer before you. A warning to the rest of your kin on the lowest, warmest, most fragile and cruelly treated side of the hemospectrum so that they would not attempt to fight against the ways of The Empire again.

There was no place for Rufioh Nitram amongst that.

You were The Summoner now and you were about to be executed for daring to want something more for, not even for yourself really (it was hard to want anything for yourself when you could hardly settle on a 'yourself' to want for) but for those of yours that weren't in any place to want or hope for better themselves, for those who'd been told from the moment they could comprehend it that they'd never be anything more than tools to be used and thrown away once they were deemed 'broken' by those who thought themselves so much better than them simply because of the colder, bluer blood than ran through them.

The door to your cell opens and with it a sudden burst of agony to your senses.

The slow grinding of moving, rusted metal pierces ears adjusted to silence and you vainly attempt to cast your eyes away from the dramatic increase of light as it's finally allowed inside. It's too different, too sudden a change after spending however long you had in the dark, it takes you longer than you want it to for your ears to stop ringing in the renewed quiet, still echoing with the sounds of metal slowly grinding against metal and for your eyes to clear of the figure-shaped-shadow amongst a doorway of burning light imprinted upon them.

You hate that you have to wait to see the faces of whoever it is that'll be escorting you to your ending, it's a good tactic you'll admit but you hate it all the same. You blink as things click back into processing the world around you as they're supposed to and you feel your pumper freeze in your chest at the image being fed into your think pan.

Where you'd expected to see faceless nobodies, unimportant and uncaring, just there to complete their task and nothing more, instead you lock gazes with the Grand Highblood himself, leader of the Clown Church, main authority of the land and all around complete and utter bastard.

The very same troll who's orders you'd defied all that time ago at the start of this whole endeavour.

You can... barely even recall back to that point in time, it feels like so, so long ago. Like a whole other life and maybe it had been because it'd been before you were The Summoner, something a lot of trolls you'd interacted with liked to gloss over and pretend never existed.

But you think... you think he might have been ordering you and your squad off on some mission, run of the mill what with the Alternian Military all falling under the Church's orders at some point or another with the Empress spreading her Tyranny through the stars. But it'd been different because... because it'd been impossible, you'd known it was an impossible endeavour he had been trying to send you off on and you'd tried to tell him that but he hadn't cared to listen to you. He hadn't given a single bit of thought to the fact that he'd wanted you and yours to just throw your lives away for nothing when there had been a hundred other, a hundred better, solutions if he had just let go of his pride long enough to just listen, admit to the fact that he didn't know everything about everything.

And you'd just... you'd had enough.

You hadn't walked into his throne room with the intention of revealing your mutation, not even in your most horrific sleeping-terrors had the thought ever crossed your mind, and you certainly hadn't expected to be able to just escape him and his mirthful pack of rabid attack dogs. The dragon had been a neat bonus though, even if more than a handful of trolls insisted that she was actually

very haunted by the recently deceased Neophyte, you would allow that she was a neat haunted bonus but that was it.

And from there? It had only escalated and you'd never even had the tiniest want to consider stopping any of it. Not while you were still free to exist as you wanted to.

You hadn't been expecting to ever see the Grand Highblood again, or at least you'd hoped you wouldn't see him again, not in this life or whatever counted as the next one, but there he was in all his... questionable glory.

You lift your chin and bare your blunt, Lowblood teeth at him, wings flaring out as much as they're able to with how they were restrained and you make it clear to him that as much as you're bound and at every possible disadvantage you will not go down easy if he's planning to just kill you here and now in this cold, isolated room. You're not going to fight the fate you've been handed in life, you're not that stupid and there's nothing left for you anymore, but there's no way on Alternia that you're just going to let him put an end to you where no one could see without so much as the barest hint of a struggle.

A name's breathed into the tense air of the tiny, cold room and you feel yourself freeze; the breath stolen due to your lungs being squeezed tight in your chest.

The Grand Highblood just said your true name.

You don't... don't know how he knows that name. You don't understand, there's just no possible way he could have known it, could have remembered it after all this time, you'd been a nobody then, there's no reason for him to have known it in the first place let alone having remembered it up to this point in time.

Rufioh hadn't been worth remembering, not until after he'd become The Summoner.

Your pumper's frozen, still and aching in the hollow of your chest, throat tight and a chill stiffening your spine that you know has nothing to do with whatever chucklevoodooos he may be using to put the fear of him into you. You're left just starting up at the giant, hulking form of the Highblood as he steps further into the rooms, taking up all the free space of it and not even bothering to give you the dignity of pretending he has to worry about you attacking him or, even more unlikely, escaping. Which is more than enough to make you snap back into focus because like hell you're going to let that continue.

You snarl at him, lips pulling back over your teeth even as your wings attempt to spread further in a display made ineffective by heavy, piercing chains. He doesn't react at all to your threat, he just rolls his eyes and scoffs at you like

you're some wriggler trying to stand up to a troll fresh from their secondary adult moult and continues to draw closer and closer still until you have nowhere else to go, nowhere to retreat to with how tightly you're pressing your back against the wall. He kneels in front of you, giving no thought or care to the fact that he's putting himself so close to your teeth and fangs; like you've never been a threat to him and never could be. He reaches out to grasp your chin in a single, giant, blood-stained clawed hand and holding you in place despite your struggles to free yourself of the grip.

You're trapped now, the wall's at your back, pressing your wings uncomfortably close to your body and his hand is a freezing iron vice holding you in place and you hate it. You try to snap your teeth, growl as much as you're able to in your current position, well aware that it holds absolutely nothing to the noises Highbloods are able to create but unwilling to be caught not trying to all the same. You will not let him look down upon you more than he already is, you won't.

He opens his mouth and his words are low, slow and coiling in your think pan and it causes you to flinch back as much as you can.

He wants you to repent. To beg and plead his forgiveness. The Empire's forgiveness. Repent for going against the Empire in the way you had, to the extent you had. He wants you to play into his sick amusements by turning traitorous and turncoat yourself to all you've worked and strode towards to get to this point in time at your perhaps not inevitable end. To cast The Sufferer and his teachings from your pan and pumper so that you may be spared and allowed to continue to draw breath into your lungs.

Save your own filthy, mutant hide.

Escape the execution block and the mass hollering for your blood to paint the walls of the very church you'd disgraced so long ago.

Become nothing more than a doll he can claim to have re-attached the strings to and become Rufioh Nitram again, loyal worker, subordinate. His plaything in all the ways someone like you should be.

It'd be so easy, he promises you, soft and quiet and so very persuasive. So easy to just fall into place like he says you were made to do.

But...

Rufioh Nitram had been the one who started all of this.

You had been Rufioh Nitram when you had cast aside your position and told him that you were not going to throw away your life or the life of any of your squad for something so incredibly stupid as a troll who wouldn't listen to reason

and you were the same troll now. The same troll and more besides, no matter what this clown thought of you.

You are no doll. No clown's play-thing.

You are Rufioh Nitram.

You are The Summoner and yours is not a story that continues past tonight. Yours is not one of great importance or regard, not meant to continue past this point, not meant to linger and over-stay the welcome you were so graciously given.

No.

No, yours is nothing but a steppingstone, a secondary chapter to what was already started by The Sufferer, The Signless, before you. A precursor to what the generations to come will continue with pride in their pumpers and fire in their eyes and you are not going to let this clown ruin any of that. It is not his place any more than it is yours.

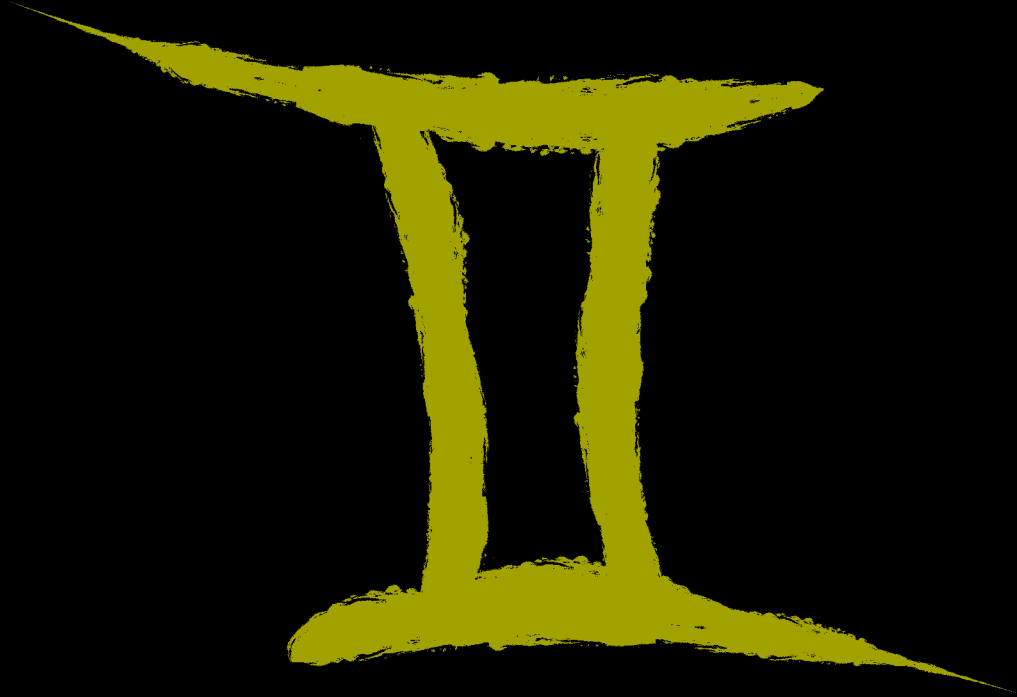
You are The Summoner and you spit in the face of the Grand Highblood for his offer, proud and defiant as you ever were in your life, yours might be nothing more than part of a bigger story but you decide how your life draws to its close.

And when you are taken to meet your ending point, bruise blossoming large and bronze on your face, you have eyes only for the highest of purples trained upon you. You don't look to the crowd of ravenous, cull-thirsty faithful around you, only him.

Your story ends here. But with your death the Signless' message lives on.

You are just the first of the rebellions he will influence and nowhere near the last.

You go to meet the Handmaid with the certainty of that seared into the very core of you.



Before the World Was Big

Psiignciple

There is no routine here.

It's one of the hardest things to get used to, now that you've left. Your life had been sterile walls and nights timed out to the minute and then it was over, sweeps and sweeps of schedule made instinctual gone in a moment. You don't know what to do with yourself now that you have time that is finally your own.

The others relocating with you seem to fall into the disorder like it was natural, talking with each other as you all trek further and further into the woods, laughing over grubloaf and relaxing in the patches of long grass after they finished making camp. You don't fit. You're too busy crawling in your own skin, your edges too sharp and definite to just *be* with all of them. Nothing feels right and you keep telling yourself that this is *good*, leaving was *good* for you because he said so, said that you deserved better but this is so far from anything *good* used to mean and sometimes you're drowning in it, that new definition. Sometimes you can't come up for air.

When that happens, you find yourself going to the perimeter of camp to look for the highest branch on the highest tree, picking yourself up with your psi until you're nestled out of sight and just closing your eyes and *waiting* to feel nothing again, for your skin to not be hot to the touch and your brain not to be scrambled until it's static. Leaving the moment entirely like it's a switch you can flick off and pretending you're still in the familiarity of being alone for as long as you can. It's a crutch and you're making an effort to rely on it less and less but you're here again, trying to catch your breath and distract yourself with the background image of everyone below you going about their night. It's comforting, being able to see everything go on in front of you without having to be a part of it yourself. There aren't any surprises.

And then you see him.

Watching The Signless weave through conversations is like staring down a sun about to supernova, bright and beautiful and undeniable. He's the center of the sky and you can feel the tug of being in his orbit whenever you're around him and you've felt that feeling before but with him, for the first time, it's not negative, not *smothering*, and that catches you off guard. He's held out a tether for you- for *all* of you- and while everyone around you has gladly accepted, you hesitate. You want nothing more than to find something to grab onto but when it's in front of you, when it has a voice and it says "*just checking in,*" or "*we're always here if you need anything,*" all soft and inviting, when it's *real*, you don't know what to do but cave into yourself.

He continues making his social rounds, talking to everyone around the camp you all set up a couple of days ago. It's all mismatched: tents fashioned from heavy light reflective fabric resting on top of wooden spears embedded into the ground, sprinkled here and there under the protection of thick canopies of trees, a firepit off towards the clearing with logs and blankets in the grass surrounding it, a crate full of sopor patches lying open. You watch him turn to another troll, say a few words and then rest his hand on their shoulder in one disarming movement. Even

from your perch, you can see whoever he's talking to relax under his touch, like they finally breathed out without being aware they were holding their breath in the first place.

Does he know that he can take everyone's walls down in the same sentence and not even be trying? Does he know how much power he has just through a hand on a shoulder, a soft word on his lips, a glance that impossibly but unconditionally knows so much?

You don't understand him. To be fair, there's an ever-expanding list of things you don't understand now that you're out in the real world again, but unlike the other concepts you're getting familiar with, you don't think you'll ever be able to wrap your head around him, his family. How easily kindness comes to him. How he could look at a forgettable person in an institute training to fight for everything he stands against and see something worth saving.

You hear the scratching of claws on wood and the rustle of disturbed leaves, then nothing, before a sudden flash of green pops into the corner of your sight as someone takes a hold of your branch from the lower canopy and swings up onto it in one fluid motion.

All instinct, your psi shoots out in front of you and takes hold of them, pushing them *back* and leaving them hovering away from the branch in an outline of red and blue all within seconds. You're fight or flight, barely allocating enough thought from escape routes to keep yourself breathing, until you realize there's a voice in the background of your racing mind. Until you look up.

You're holding The Disciple over a fifty-foot drop to the ground.

She reaches her hand out to you, the motion weighed down in the fog of your psi. "Hey, hey, you're okay. Listen to me. I need you to find your breathing with me- that's it. Slow breath in, slow breath out." Still somewhere else, you follow her words. "That's perfect. Just keep breathing."

You slowly relax your white-knuckled grip on the trunk you previously didn't even know you were doing, focusing on carefully carrying her over to the branch you're on and setting her down as delicately as you can. Once your hold is off of her, your hands start to quiet their shaking and you wipe the sweaty tendrils of bangs clinging to your forehead off of your face, but the dread in your chest stays put. You just attacked a member of the inner circle. You almost *culled* a member of the inner circle.

She pulls in her legs to sit cross-legged on the limb, combing her dreads out of her eyes, absently picking at the splatters of blood on her clothes. She must've been hunting. If there's still any fear from before, she doesn't show it on her face. "I wasn't trying to sneak up on you like that, promise-" you start aggressively signing *sorry* over and over until she gently takes your hand mid-motion and puts it back in your lap, "*-hey*. You don't have anything to apologize over, *I'm* the one who should be saying sorry for nearly making your pusher beat out of your chest! I didn't think anyone would be up here with me is all." She finds your gaze and gives you a reassuring smile. "I've done way worse on reflex, trust me."

"Psii, right?" You nod. "Well, Psii, I can totally climb down if I'm interrupting anything, no hard feelings. There are plenty of trees I can look for chirpbeast's eggs in instead."

You hesitate and then decisively shake your head, signing *I'm okay*. She smiles again, that same unmistakable fire in her eyes.

There's a quiet, and she looks out to the skyline and everything below, the current of the wind rippling through you both and making the beads at the ends of her hair chime a soft twinkling sound. She pulls her legs into her chest in the cold. "You can see everything from up here," she says under her breath. "It's beautiful."

You look out with her, at the stars, at the trolls underneath their light, trying to hush your mind into seeing the world before you as something more than an accumulation of potential threats until your pan hurts from the focus and you turn to her instead, her eyes still transfixed on where the canopy of trees meets sky. You don't understand what she sees, what makes her smile about surveying all of that unknown, but gods, you want to. You want to more than anything.

She looks back to you, resting her head on her knees and holding your gaze in the comfortable silence. "I know it usually isn't your thing," she starts, her voice quieter than usual, "but after this, my remaining plans tonight consist exclusively of bugging Kan until he packs a bowl for everyone, if you wanted to come with." You break her eye contact, suddenly not knowing where to put yourself. She stands up, her claws gripping the branch below her and then faster than you can make out, she darts down to a lower branch. "No pressure, obviously. I just wanted to extend the invitation." A hand reaches up to you in the dark.

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You walk back into camp still holding onto The Disciple, trailing softly behind her as she carries a dead howlbeast slung over her shoulders. A circle of trolls sitting outside one of the tents mending folded piles of blankets and clothing wave to her as she passes by, and she lets go of you to run up to an older jadeblood in the group and plants a kiss on her cheek. The jadeblood looks at her sternly and says something about the bloodstains all over her good shirt but takes her hands into her's so soft and careful all the same, fussing with getting all the stray leaves out of her hair.

They part and The Disciple walks back to where you've been standing like an upturned thumb tack on the ground, dead still in the middle of everyone going about their night. She gives you a reassuring smile and you realize how tightly you're wound and how every step forward feels out of place, and how all of that unravels into something more manageable when she stands right back next to you and leads you further into the stretch of tents, all twisting and turning vibrant patterned fabrics until you get to the clearing; the fire someone coaxed in the middle, trolls lying on blankets or just on the soft tallgrass alone, all of their voices and individual conversation mixing together into a slow hum in your ears. Somewhere in your peripheral, The Disciple heaves the carcass down with a swift motion onto the forest floor.

Catching up to you while stretching her arms over her head until there's an audible snap, she tugs on your sleeve to get your attention, and suddenly the world goes back into focus. "You still okay with all this?" Oh fuck. You must've been looking all lost on accident.

You smile, maybe not for yourself necessarily, it doesn't feel right, but you think it will make her feel better if you have some kind of recognizable emotion. "Yeah I... yeah. I'm okay." Your voice sounds strange when it's finally not in your head.

And then she smiles back, but when she smiles it's different, it's familiar to her and fills her whole face and it's bright and beaming. She takes your hand and runs toward everyone, the soft grass rustling ever so faintly as it parts for the two of you. She waves her hand into the air. "Kan!"

And there's The Signless, sitting aside an overturned log with a guitar in his hands, the shadows from the fire dancing against the part of his face that's leaned over looking at the strings. He has a shawl thrown over him, all interwoven with deep grays and browns and reds, his curls falling in front of him in long strokes, stopping just before they'd brush his thighs. He's humming something under his breath, something you can't make out in between the crackle of the flames and the background noise of everyone around them, and you think: he looks so *calm* here, just smiling and rocking in time with the little chords under his fingers. You don't think, if you were The Signless and the fact that you were still breathing was a direct inconvenience to the Empire, you could ever be anything *close* to calm in your life.

He sees her and leans the guitar beside him to catch her in his arms, Di scooping his jaw into the palms of her hands and peppering his forehead with little kisses. He laughs and it sounds like a song. It's something so unashamedly delicate you don't know if you should turn away (everything here is too delicate to be real) but then they beckon you closer and tell you to sit with them and he takes your hand and tells you how glad he is to see you again and gods there's so much power in that, how they can just choose to *feel* so much. You wonder if they realize.

"I found him in a tree," Di says.

"Of course you did. I still don't know *how* either of you can do that, by the way."

Di turns to you. "Kan's absolutely terrified of heights. The last time I tried to teach him how to climb he just about lost his shit."

"Hey-"

"I had to carry him on my back all the way down because he couldn't open his eyes without freaking out, I swear- oh! Hey, thanks," A rustblood in the circle passes Di a glass piece about the length of your forearm. "Kan, you still have your matches?"

You watch as she presses the flame into the bowl, the inside of the chamber going all milky as the red of the embers sink deeper and deeper into the contents of the bowl before she pulls it out and takes a deep inhale, smoke trailing her nostrils as she passes it to Sign, the bowlpiece still glowing. He does the same, striking a couple of matches before he gets a light that sticks.

He turns to you. "Have you ever...?"

You shake your head. You've seen the piece itself before, the two of them keep it out in the open for everyone to use, but you've never thought about actually *hitting* it. "What..." you

try to think of the right thing to say in your head without sounding stupid, “what is it supposed to feel like?”

“Well,” Sign starts, getting out a glass jar and packing a new bowl, pressing it down softly every so often with the pad of his finger before he crumbles more flower onto it, “it really depends. The strain we grow has a high CBD content, so it mostly is just supposed to relax your muscles and provide pain relief, but there’s a little headspace with it, too. I know for me, at least, it makes me feel a little less anxious and a little more tired but, the good kind of tired, you know. The tired you need sometimes.”

Di chimes in. “You’re totally welcome to try it, if you think it might be something that’ll help! But if you don’t want to, it’s no big deal at all.”

You look at the piece in Sign’s hands, the clear glass inlaid with red swirling up and around the chamber like growing vines. You think, if it can actually make you feel the way he describes it, that would be... something else entirely. “I just don’t really know what to... how to do it.”

“I promise it’s way less complicated than it looks,” Di says, “and I can light it and take it out of the carb for you, so you don’t have to worry about timing or anything!”

You nod and she puts the piece in your lap, letting her fingers brush over the back of your hand when she shows you where you’re supposed to hold the stem. She tells you: “I’m only going to light it for a few seconds, okay? So you don’t have a coughing fit.” You give her a thumbs up.

“Alright, breathe in on three. One, two...” The match strikes.

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The only other time you had been *on* anything, had your perception chemically altered, it was given to you with no explanation because you weren’t worth one, intravenously in some empty block that looked like all the other empty blocks next to it. You remember you went from thinking about how the walls were so white it hurt to look at them to feeling the wave crash over you and then you were thinking about *everything* and then you were thinking about *nothing* and then it went back to everything again as you felt yourself mapping out the synapses firing in your body every nanosecond, how you could *feel* each individual one like an echo through your skull to the thud thud thud of your pusher and you *were* everything, you were light itself and holy fuck did it *burn*.

This is completely different.

Sign explained as much, but you weren’t expecting- you didn’t think you’d ever intimately know what it felt like to slow down. It creeps onto you inch by inch, this *sinking* into yourself but this time it isn’t drowning, just enveloping in a welcoming way, caught swathed in some kind of warmth all around you. You think in snapshots: running the grass through your fingers over and over again because you like the way it feels under your touch. You’re laughing. You’re laughing? You’re laughing and it feels great, actually. Now you’re two feet off the ground and you don’t remember why, hovering in sparks of red and blue and wow you feel like a

cloud, something so slight and beautiful as you move your limbs weightless through the air. Your head peaks over Di's journal as she scribbles something down in loopy olive script while leaning against Sign, their legs all interwoven. She looks up at you from where you're hovering and reaches for you, grounding you back onto the floor and beside her, showing you the paragraphs she's been working on- the scribbled out sentences and the hasty notes sideways in between the margins.

"I've been writing about tonight. And about you, see-" she takes your finger and traces it around the twists and curves of her letters, one, two, three, four. "That's how you write out your title. P - S - I - I. Two I's, right?" You nod to her, yes, two I's- but you can't move your eyes off the paper. On your own, you run the pad of your finger through the motions of the letters over and over and over again until you can see them clear in your head and suddenly these scribbles *mean* something to you. Di slips her pen into your grip and, hesitantly as if it's going to hurt the book itself, you press down until ink bleeds into the paper. Your grip is shaky and the lines weave in and out of legibility but you go through with each letter in one of the blank margins, looking back to reference her confident strokes until you're done. You pause, inspecting your work before decisively snapping the cap back onto the pen, handing that and the notebook both back to her. She looks at your writing and glows.

"I can teach you more," she says, after a few moments pass and she's properly found her burrowing position in Sign's arms, "whenever you have some time to kill, just find me and we can work on things. I mean, if you think you'd like that."

"I would." Gods, your voice sounds so out of practice. But it doesn't matter so much, you realize, when you're with her. When you're with either of them. "I'd like that a lot."

--

You watch Di fall asleep to the repetitive movements of Sign running his fingers through her scalp over and over, her head resting on his lap, the forgotten journal slipping from her grip and landing upturned on the grass next to them. She grinds her teeth in her sleep. It's sweet.

So then it's just you and him, you; with your legs pulled so tight to your chest your kneecaps look like spearheads, and him; the boy that saved you, the boy with the fire in his words, the boy with the bright red showing up in little flakes next to his pupils. You don't mention that.

Instead the two of you talk about everything under the sun, how he's almost nine sweeps and he didn't ever really picture making it this long (*"Mom doesn't like it when I talk about myself like that, but it's true, even in my dreams I never make it this far-"*) and in return you tell him how you didn't think you'd make it till now either, but also how you've never really given it much thought because it's never felt okay to think that far in the future (*but you sign it, too, all slow along with your words. Signing it makes it feel better.*) There's silence. You draw spirals on the ground as the light from the fire grows dimmer and dimmer into the night.

"It's just," he starts, "I guess it's just the world feels so big now. I don't know what I'm doing- ever, maybe, there are some times when I feel like for one perfect moment I do- but then I

realize how much more there is left to be done and how absolutely fucking miniscule I am compared to all of that and then it's just like, I'm a wriggler, again, Tuna, and I- oh. Fuck."

Your words almost choke you. "How do you know that." There's a hissing noise around you and sparks start swarming your vision and your hair picks up in the static. "My hatchname- *how* do you know that."

"I swear, it's-"

"Don't lie to me."

His eyes are transfixed to the ground as he runs a hand through his curls and smiles as if to say *I've really done it now, huh*, and then he stops in thought. It crosses your mind: he's not scared of you. He should be scared of you.

"Would you believe me," he says, "if I told you it was in a dream?"

So he tells you about his visions. About the world Before, a little about *his* Mituna and *his* Meulin and *his* Porrim and how there must have been more who are here now too- his description feels purposely fragmented. He's tiptoeing delicately, rethinking every word he says after it's out loud and the whole time you can tell how hard he's searching into your eyes for approval, for some type of sign to know he hasn't lost you.

"I sound crazy I-" he breathes out. There's a pause. "*I know* I sound crazy." You realize while talking he's bunched the fabric of his shawl in between his fingers in anxious tugs, running through it over and over which such intensity you're sure it's going to unravel. "And I wouldn't believe myself, either, if I didn't know what it felt like to be there.

"There's a type of fear there still and- and inequality, I guess, on a completely different scale- but this *weight*, Psii. This weight that you and me and everyone we've cared about carries with them every single night for so long that it just feels like it's a part of us is suddenly. Absent. There aren't eyes all over your back and you don't have this intrinsic urge to jump out of your skin every time you make a step forward and what I wouldn't *give* to bring all of you there, even if it's not forever. Even if it's just for a moment. And I guess that's why I choose to speak, because what kind of fucking *sin* did all of us commit- by virtue of just getting thrown into this specific rock in this specific existence- that justifies all this? What could we have ever possibly *done* to deserve any of this? And why do we need to be vindicated? I just know this: this isn't living. Not really."

He doesn't belong here. You realize as much now, to the exact extent of how everything he's made up of contradicts the very nature of this planet but instead of scaring you away, it ignites something deep inside of you, some all consuming need to carve out the hurt from Alternia until this world finally has a place for him. The last of the embers die out. Before you can overthink it, you grab for his still-fidgeting hands in the darkness, holding them under your touch so delicate before you carefully intertwine your fingers with his. You squeeze them tight as if to say: *I'm here*.

"I believe you," you say, all quiet. "And- you can call me Mituna. You and your matesprit."

And somewhere in that silence, in that cold, in that dark: you feel him squeeze back. “I’m glad you chose to leave, you know. And I want you to know that: none of us here think that was any kind of straightforward decision. You put your trust in us and you put your trust in yourself and that’s, there’s power in that, Mituna.” You smile. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to have found you again.”

You look out at the clearing, the tents, the beginnings of the forest, and the whole wide world that’s beyond. It’s still terrifying and you don’t think it’ll ever feel completely safe, but there’s something new there, too. The way the dew rests on the blades of grass. The trees swaying back and forth, back and forth in the wind. The deep reds and blues and purples of the sky. The two trolls next to you and the ins and outs of their steady breathing, how soft his hands are when they’re intertwined with yours: it’s beautiful. You can *see* beautiful now.

“I’m glad I’m here too.”



*Love is a Shield
and a Weapon*

Elliptical

Signless is thinking about death.

The Disciple, Di for casual shorthand, Meulin for casual intimacy, knows this with a single look at his face. There are many sides to Signless. Different people get to see different ones, and the layers peel back slowly the more you get to know him, but she alone has seen them all. The Psiioniic and the Dolorosa have witnessed most, but this -- the condemned man waiting to hear the manner of his execution -- this one is only shared with her.

(He will, someday, be a truly condemned man truly hearing the manner of his execution. So will she. They've stopped pretending with each other, because they have to pretend with everyone else, and gods damn them if they don't have one person with whom to be honest.)

He's standing on the deck of the ship, his arms braced against the railing, looking out at the ocean. The waves glitter with pink and green, a million shifting rubies and emeralds. The wind lifts the curls of his hair and the fabric of his cloak, the universe's way of wrapping him in an embrace. He is a forgotten remnant of a perfect world, a martyr in the making, a million sweeps of righteous fury sewn into the skin of a single troll.

Divine symbolism is not the type of poetry he enjoys. There are more effective ways to spread the word, he thinks, than by telling the people he was hatched to be their savior. And it's true. Signless should not be the center of their work. The visions give him clarity of purpose and allow him to draw distinctions about Before and After. But the work would still need doing visions or not, and there will always be people who can offer shelter and warmth and comfort and knowledge.

The work will survive without him. Without her.

She'll be damned, though, if she ever allows the visions not to matter.

She moves to his side, lays her hand over one of his. He glances at her face and then away, back out at the waves. The faraway expression doesn't leave his eyes; he doesn't shake himself awake and plaster on a smile, because he'll let her see anything.

Her fingers are ink-smudged, a pen tucked behind her ear, her hair pulled haphazard up around her horns so it'll stop getting in the way of paint. She herself has offered her fair share of fake smiles. In the past, she might have cracked a grin here, tried to make him laugh, steered him toward happier thoughts, and he'd allow it because he didn't want her to be unhappy.

That's not what he needs, though. And it's not what she wants to be. Not for him. There aren't falsehoods between them. They don't indulge each other with masks and politeness. Sometimes the comfort comes from just having someone to stand with you when you're sad.

"You wanna talk about it?" she asks. The answer might be no, and that's fine; she'll stay by him, press their arms together, kiss the shell of his ear. Love him.

His mouth tightens around the edges. The ship dips and rises against the swells. Ten seconds pass, then another ten.

His voice, when he speaks, is another piece of him reserved for her presence. With Signless, emotional intimacy is a play in reversals. The average troll sees nothing but cruelty from their peers until they're nestled close enough to quadrant. Signless' very existence is a protest, and so is every way he interacts with people. Every person who meets him finds warmth and kindness and earnestness. You could think, after a singular conversation with the man, that his bloodpusher is soft all the way through, and that no one ever taught him to shield it.

That's not the truth, though, not really. Signless does have more capacity for love than any troll she's ever met except maybe herself. But the softness cushions a core of steel, not the other way around. He has seen so many things. For every suffering person they've saved, another couldn't be helped. A man without the strength to face constant grief would have crumbled from the pain of this life a long time ago.

He won't let most people see the anger and the hurt and the ferocity, aside from when he gets the fire in him during a sermon, lights up from the inside out. That's an active choice. He obsesses about image, about propaganda, about assumptions. About how if he's three-dimensional, people will pick and choose which pieces they think are real. So a person has to get close to recognize the

Signless underneath the Signless, the one who chose to resist in the first place, the one who said, *It will be harder to fight with words than weapons, but I'm doing it, because it's right.*

And if, sometimes, the enormity of it overwhelms him, and the dying won't stop painting their blood on the backs of his eyelids, and the world feels shitty and fucked up and cancerous and broken in a way they'll never fix -- well, no one gets to see that.

Except for Di.

"We'll be forgotten," he says.

His tone is flat, cold, empty. He will never let anyone else hear this voice, because to have imperfect faith is to betray himself, and he cannot reconcile what he fears with what he believes. But she knows what it is to be afraid, and despite it her faith doesn't slip, and she doesn't judge him for his lapses, so he'll give her this vulnerability and trust her to be his center.

Signless does not need to be remembered for his own sake. He's not despairing over vanity. He's not perfect (part of loving a person is knowing this, recognizing their imperfections, challenging their perspective), and there can occasionally be an undercurrent of arrogance in his actions, a desire for importance. But that's not the core of his motivation, and so being unremembered is not inherently intolerable. If Signless could save this world by erasing himself, he would. This world has always mattered more than himself.

She knows what he's really saying. Fearing. That they're pebbles in an angry ocean. That they can't stand against the tides. That the Empire is too strong, that the institutional systems are too ingrained, that this world will never be better for them having existed in it. That nothing matters.

Worrying about the future seems to her like so much pointless speculation. The end is never more interesting than the journey. No matter what happens tomorrow, or the night after that, or the night after that, the way they exist now makes a difference. It makes a difference that the Psioniic and every other slave they've freed can breathe and trust and exist and love without pain, and even if every single one of them ends up burned and buried, the fact that they

tasted freedom will still matter. It makes a difference that they've taught people to heal and help rather than hurt and kill.

But that's not enough to provide comfort. He already knows how they've changed the world. The systems remain in place. For every person they've touched, millions more need help, and change happens too slowly, frustrating, agonizing.

"I do not think that's true," she says. His fingers twitch under hers. "We're memorable people."

"We're a footnote. Not even a prologue. Fucking nothing."

She laces their fingers together proper, closes her eyes. Signless doesn't feel like this. He has always believed that he isn't a savior destined for power, but that he was given the visions for a reason. She agrees. Why else would the universe bestow a blood mutant with a loving mother and a protective family and a hunger for change and the tools to know exactly how to fix the world? Too many coincidences stack up to this doomed man safe in her arms.

"You had a vision," she whispers.

He doesn't speak. When she opens her eyes again, his mouth is twisted down at the corners, gaze still fixed on the water. Behind the emptiness, the yawning abyss of grief is starting to open inside him, and she exhales softly. Wraps her arms around him. Hugs him tight, loving him, keeping him close. Lays her head against his shoulder.

"What did you see?" Her breath ghosts over his skin, and she brushes her lips against his jaw.

"It doesn't matter."

"They all matter."

"Do they?" Signless sways in her arms. It might just be from balancing on the gently rocking ship, but she doesn't think so.

"Yes." This she believes, firm, unyielding. This she will continue to believe no matter what he's seen. "They do."

He sinks down to sit against the side of the ship. The coldness is crumbling; it never lasts for long. Signless is only cold and remote when he's feeling too much pain to process. His inhale is ragged, and when he breathes out, it's a short pant that doesn't let enough air escape.

She sinks down with him. Pulls back, presses a hand against the middle of his spine. "Breathe, love."

"I'm trying."

"I've got you."

They sit like that for... a long time, probably. Seconds and minutes don't have meaning. There's just the two of them and the stars and the sea, and the occasional footsteps of crew members creeping around them to avoid interrupting private time. Everyone here has been around long enough to see Signless fall apart. He doesn't need to shut himself in his cabin below deck.

"I can't bear it," he says simply, when he's finally drawing enough air into his lungs to avoid total collapse. "I can't do it, Di. All this inside me. I can't." There's still a flattened quality to his tone, but she doesn't think it's a lack of feeling. He's just stating facts. His mind and heart are a ruin, whatever he's seen has made shreds of his soul, and he can't bear it.

She shifts onto her knees and wraps him in another embrace, stretches to press her face between his horns. She says, "You have to."

He shudders in her grasp. His fingers curl in his lap, looking for something to hold onto, so she shifts them again until he can hold her back. He digs his claws into her skin and clings, not trying to harm so much as ground himself. She hugs him close, his warmth against her body, life burning between them, and there's so much love inside her, too much, bleeding, breaking, and she can't bear it either.

He says, "I know."

"Healing isn't linear," she says. They'll bounce concepts off each other, sometimes, awake until noon, on fire with passion and interest and articulation. This is an old one. "If that applies to people,

it applies to society too. Things won't be like this forever. If we don't see the end in our lifetimes, that's okay. We're laying the groundwork. There will always be someone who picks up where we leave off."

"There will be someone," he says, soft. "It just won't be me."

Oh, her love, her heart. "Let's go inside."

When they're curled up inside the cabin they most often share, laying in the pile loosely entangled, he tells her about the Second Signless. The child bearing his blood who will end this broken world and begin a new age. The glitch in the universe that won't ever be healed, not by them, not by a thousand revolutions, not by all the rhetoric and debate in the world. Signless does not, as a general rule, believe that fate makes anything hopeless. But this is difficult information to reconcile.

"We won't ever fix anything," he concludes. His eyes are closed, his lashes making shadowed patterns across his cheeks. "We were hatched into the wrong world. That's all it is. That's all it's ever been."

She presses her fingertips against his mouth to feel his breath on her skin, her jaw tightening with pain. It's a terminal diagnosis when they'd hoped for a cure. It's an existential crisis wrapped into a cocoon of pseudo-meta bullshit. It's a damning portrait of fundamental brokenness, no more changeable than the dance of the solar systems in the galaxy.

She doesn't believe it for a second.

"So we lose," she says. "So what?"

Their eventual loss is not something she doubts. The visions rarely impart so clear a message, and when they do, it's best to listen. Signless usually needs her to help interpret. But he's not asking her to clarify the metaphors or analyze the subtext or find a new solution. He's just imparting pared-down facts without wrapping them in poetry or prose. The world is unfixable. Slavery will continue. Trolls will suffer. Planets will be conquered. Billions will die. Billions more will be tortured. Nearly everyone will exist inside hazy misery, no respite.

Everyone dies eventually. That's been a law of every universe since universes began.

But fuck the universe. Fuck fate and what it tells them. Fuck the writer of their story for trying to hand them despair. She's not a person with visions to untangle about the nature of reality. She doesn't plan around premonitions like Psii or study a forgotten past like Signless. She lives in the present, in this moment, in this life. And if the world is shitty and broken, that's okay. She doesn't need to fix it. She just needs to be one less shitty, broken thing.

He exhales a long sigh against her fingertips. She moves them to stroke through his hair.

"So we keep working anyway," he says, resigned.

He would have come to this conclusion himself regardless of her conviction; he can't turn his back on his people. But it does help to have a grounding force. Di is the only one of their little trio who experiences time in a linear direction. She and the Dolorosa bond over it, sometimes, this anchoring in place. Even the Dolorosa has tasted death, though. Di is the only one whose existence is uncomplicated by the terrifying, unanswerable questions of the universe.

She nods, leans in, kisses him so gently on the mouth. "We keep working anyway," she repeats. "Because we do the work in front of us that needs doing. The blankets we've given out in the desert to shelter trolls from the sun. The medicine we've used to treat wounds and illness. The trolls we've given safety from their masters, the ones we've saved from starvation, the ones we've taught to defend themselves. Think about Mituna. If you ever want a reminder of why we do the work, I'm sure he'll happily show you his scars. Fuck the universe."

He kisses her nose, the space between her brows. "That's wise."

"If the world is broken, we have to be what's not broken inside it. That's how we win, even if we lose. That's how we make it right."

The corners of his eyes crinkle, but there's such shining sadness in his face. "I love you so much."

"I love you too."

And she does. She loves him, and she loves the movement, and she loves the poetry, and she loves the work they do. It will always matter regardless of how the world punishes them. She'll write the words and their meanings and the philosophy and the aching and the yearning in her lungs, and the day she's written enough will be the day she dies. The ink is her soul made tangible, her heart laid open, and she'll catch him and Mituna and Porrim and all the others she's ever loved, and she'll press them so carefully between the pages. Preservation. Salvation. Memory.

"We'll be forgotten," he'd said, but she doesn't believe that either, because Meulin Leijon can move mountains for love, and the force of it shakes through her bones. Ripples outward. Seismic shift, earthquake, catastrophe, realignment.

They'll be remembered.

She'll make sure of it.



I Speak Not Loud nor Long

Chlorinetri fluoride

Your name is Porrim Maryam, you are five sweeps old, and you have spent the last twelve hours caring for newborn grubs, a task you are quite good at, even for a jadeblood.

Out of all the five sweep old acolyte auxiliatrices, you have hatched the most grubs to successfully withstand the trials. Elder Onvali, your mentor, says you should be quite proud of yourself. And you are, your cheeks flushing with it.

She promised you a piece of sweet candy - a bit of contraband from the world above - as a little gift for your exemplary work this perigee. Frowning, as you stand in the communal nutritionblock, waiting for your morning meal, you reflect that you still have yet to receive it. You're in no rush, but sticky candy makes grubloaf go down easier

Since your palecrush, Zaniah, seems to be getting reprimanded by her own mentor, you awkwardly shuffle from one foot to the next. Usually, you sit with her during meals. However, it looks as if she's going to get reprimanded straight through this particular meal.

You frown. You don't mind eating alone, but you prefer not to.

Before you can find somewhere to sit down, an older girl beckons you over to her table.

"Make some room," she says to the others, before she clears a space for you. '

You've never eaten with six and seven sweeps old before, and the thought makes you nervous, but Syfala Kambal, the troll who called you, has never been unkind to you.

The other apprentices smile encouragingly. You bow your head, and put your hand to your mouth, in a gesture that pays reverence to the First Mother Grub, and shows respect to your elders.

"Thank you for letting me sit with you," you say, eyeing your feet.

Syfala lets out a musical little laugh, and pats your shoulder.

"No need to be so formal. No Elders sitting here."

Another apprentice at the table, whose name escapes you, snorts at this.

"Not even any full auxiliatrices. Save your manners for Elder Onvali." Then, the other girl eyes your grubloaf. "And try to eat that as fast as you can. It's better when it's still lukewarm."

Syfala snorts.

"Dunno about that, Lizzet."

You do your level best to pick at your rapidly cooling grubloaf, but you find yourself far more fixated on Syfala's face, and the way she gesticulates when she speaks than anything else. She laughs with her mouth full even though you're sure she's been reprimanded for it in the past.

The piercings she received when she turned six and earned the title of apprentice glint in the low light. She and Lizzet lose themselves in conversation again. You think they're discussing the increased production of mutated grubs, but you're not paying attention too well.

When Syfala turns to address yet another apprentice, contemplating the quick work her hands make of her food sends your bloodpusher into double time.

You dig a handkerchief out of your tunic and contemplate covering your mouth with it. Better yet, perhaps you should rise from the table and return to work before Syfala notices you staring at her overmuch. Your cheeks burn.

Lizzet raises an eyebrow at you, puzzlement quickly giving way to concern.

"Acolyte Porrim? Are you feeling unwell?"

Too late.

"Um," you stammer. "Well, I..." You fiddle with one of your eating utensils. "I was thinking about what you had been saying."

What were they talking about again, exactly?

But Lizzet, Syfala, and the others nod in tandem, as if you've spoken perfectly rationally.

"You don't have to worry about it too much, Porrim," Syfala tells you. "Changing seasons, particularly when they're as extreme as they've been this sweep, often affect viable grub production."

She puts her hand on yours by way of allaying your anxiety, sending tingles from your fingers all the way to your thinkpan. You never knew your 'pusher could pound so hard.

"Besides," she goes on brightly. "You're one of the best we have, and you're not even an apprentice. All this talk about mutants and grub quotas, none of that pertains to you yet."

Lizzet slides some of her meal over to you, while picking at her nails with an errant splinter of wood. She has a smile for you as well, but it doesn't make you feel the same way Syfala's does. Before you can protest, she sets the plate in front of you.

“C’mon. I know it’s not great, but you have to eat,” she says. “Cause you have got to be one of the skinniest acolytes I’ve seen. Turn sideways long enough and you might become invisible.”

You know she’s not saying it to make you feel self-conscious, but still. You wish you hadn’t taken seriously ill last sweep. Maybe you’d have a stronger stomach and be able to gain weight like the other jadebloods you know.

You take a cursory bite of the grayish food, a rich sweetness exploding onto your tongue. Syfala catches sight of your facial expression and grins. Idly, you reflect, as you eat, that you’d do anything to see her smile like that again.

Several perigees pass.

Your flushcrush on Syfala continues to be embarrassing and anxiety-provoking in turns. Not as anxiety-provoking as the thought of moving up from the rank of acolyte to apprentice auxiliatrix the night you turn six sweeps old.

Zaniah, now your moirail, and your friend Arvien help you memorize the thirteen duties of an auxiliatrix. You’ll have to recite them during the ceremony.

The night you receive your piercings, Elder Onvali stands beside you in your quarters. By now, she should be in the grotto with the statue of the First Mother Grub, with the other elders. There is still unattended business here, though.

Onvali takes both of your hands in hers, the cool wrinkled skin reassuring you, the way it has so many times before. She has a stylus the color of obsidian in her hand, you suppose to mark which areas of your face will receive rings.

After a great deal of time spent either lying on the floor of your quarters with Zaniah deliberating, and/or asking apprentices how the elders chose the proper parts of their faces to pierce, you’re as confused as ever.

“I have observed you since you were hatched, acolyte.” Onvali inhales slowly. “I remember your trials as if they had happened last perigee, and I was present when you were chosen by a virgin Mother Grub.”

You nod, reverent.

“Yes, elder.”

She is not yet finished.

"I remember when your lusus passed into a world beyond Alternia. How you little you were worried about what might happen to you, despite you being so young and without a lusus."

"The matriorb--" You start out, before remembering that you have spoken out of turn, and apologizing profusely. Elder Onvali somehow regards this outburst with approval.

"Precisely, Porrim. The Matriorb. An object that would ensure the propagation of our species in the event of great calamity," she says. "You were more concerned with finding a way to excise it, than agonizing about what might happen to you as a troll with no lusus. You put the concern of our race ahead of concern for your life, even before you were old enough to be tasked with such things. The First Mother clearly has important things in store for you. I am honored to have witnessed their beginnings. "

Tears gather in your eyes. You had never thought of it that way. You try your best not to cry. Such a display would be undignified.

Elder Onvali draws close to you, using her stylus to make two marks on your left eyebrow, one on your right, and one on your lower lip. Then, at long last, she departs.

You follow her into the grotto near the largest cavern, where more jades than you can count are gathered to bear witness to this ceremony. This isn't even all of the stewards who work the caverns. Just the ones whose living quarters are closest to yours.

Despite her wizened form, Elder Onvali knows how to project her voice. She leads you to a seat on a raised platform, where everyone present can see you. You will yourself to stop shaking like a wiggler.

"Tonight, Acolyte Porrim Maryam will take the next step toward becoming an auxiliatrix," Onvali says. "To that end, we will bestow upon her the golden adornments that all jadebloods who have reached this point in their training are allowed to wear."

Everyone in the audience touches their dominant hand to their mouths. You have never been afforded such respect before. It's heartening.

Another Elder named Syrrma walks over with a wooden cup of some herbal liquid in one hand, and a sharp needle in the other.

"Acolyte Porrim Maryam?" she asks loudly.

"Yes, Elder Syrrma."

She explains that the rings in your through your left eyebrow will confer on you strength. Strength to act in Alternia's best interest. You hope she means physical strength. You continue to be small for your age.

The one through your right will enable you to think quickly, when such action is required.

"As for the one in your mouth?" she goes on. "You have the makings of a fine auxiliatrix, but you must learn when to speak. The continued success of our species depends on the empire, but every troll in the empire was once hatched in caverns like these. An auxiliatrix who cannot communicate with her fellows threatens this success."

So your bouts of shyness has not been lost on her.

You nod.

"I understand, Elder. I would do nothing further to disgrace my fellow stewards."

Elder Syrrma smiles at you. Not the polite, detached smile she usually has when greeting you, but something warmer, and more personal. The terror in the back of your mind begins to soften and dissipate.

"Then, we may begin."

Deftly, she dips the needle into the herbal concoction, takes your right eyebrow, and pulls the needle through, where Elder Onvali marked your skin. Then, the two piercings on your left eyebrow.

You gaze again at all the trolls gathered, beginning to feel woozy. From four rows away from the platform, Zaniah makes a silly face at you.

Oh, no, you hope no one saw that. She'll get reprimanded. Again. You wish you could shoosh her, or something of the sort. Then, comes the final piercing. The one through your lip.

Strangely enough, you don't feel nearly as likely to faint. Zaniah's still making faces..

"Is it time for first meal yet?" you think she's mouthing at you. If she makes you laugh, you'll cull her.

You remember her ceremony a few perigees ago, and how Elder Fianye said she hoped becoming an apprentice would teach Zaniah the meanings of patience and reverence..

Everyone laughed at that.

Still, you hope this ceremony ends before an Elder notices and puts her on revenant elimination duty again. While she's exceptional at dispatching them, probably from all the time she's spent on that particular punishment detail, it's not without its dangers.

At Elder Syrrma's prompting, you recite the thirteen duties of an auxiliatrix without keeling over from anxiety.

"Rise from your seat, Apprentice Auxiliatrix Porrim Maryam," both Elders Onvali and Syrrma say in tandem, once you are finished.

They have you drink the remainder of the herbal mixture, before allowing you to join your fellows.

"I'm proud of you," Onvali murmurs, pressing a sweet into your hand.

You nod, numbly.

Your face throbs in time with your pulse, and although you'd like to do nothing more than lie down in your recuperation for an age, formalities are formalities.

The first troll vaguely in your age range and clade that you see is neither Zaniah, Lizzet, nor Arvien.

It's Syfala, idly playing with her philtrum piercing with her tongue. She ruffles your hair and offers you some water.

"So, Porrim," she says. "You made it through. Didn't even faint like Arvi did awhile back. Congratulations."

You have no idea how Syfala can manage to wear the standard-issue tunic so well. It truly is nothing short of miraculous.

"Yes. I mean, no, I did not faint," you manage. "Thanks for your compliment. High praise, um, coming from a troll like yourself."

You know what the Elders should have done? They should have given you piercings that would imbue you with bravery. Maybe then you'd be able to do something other than gawp at Syfala like a wiggler with a flushcrush.

(You may have a flushcrush, but you are no wiggler. You sigh, inwardly.)

And come to think of it, where are your friends? Zaniah's your moirail. She should definitely be around. But something tells you Zaniah has your friends occupied elsewhere, as far away from the troll in front of you as possible, in an attempt to force you to talk to Syfala. She would, too.

Joke's on her, you have no idea what to say to her.

Another few perigees pass, and you still do not.

You've come to regret many things in your six sweeps of life. All the grubloaf you've eaten, for one. Lending one of your favorite books to an apprentice auxiliatrix who refuses to return it, second off. But this is by far the worst thing you've ever managed.

For the first time, you're on revenant elimination duty as punishment detail.

The way this works is that two apprentice auxiliatrices get sent outside of the caverns to clear the area of the besotted. wandering things, before they try to come in and hurt all the cavern stewards. Not that an revenant is any match for an auxiliatrix. That said, they are distracting. It's easier to have a few trolls get rid of them while they're outside, than for jadebloods in the caverns to halt their work just to fight them once they get in.

And of all the things for which you could get in trouble, and earn this punishment, you got caught gossiping. Gossiping about Vrivre Urecht, who hates you anyway.

As Elder Onvali reminded you, there should be no discord in the caverns. The jade caste is too important for that. Therefore, any issues should be taken up with the elders.

You frown. You know Elder Onvali is grooming you to become an elder in a dozen or so sweeps, but you wish she'd stop holding you to such high standards.

Literally all everyone does when they aren't praying or caring for grubs is gossip. And it's not like Vrivre's stuck reckoning with revenants alongside you, even though she talked about you just as much as you talked about her. She got off with a warning.

Instead, you have Zaniah. Granted, that's not much of a punishment. Watching her dispatch the bulk of the revenants, all while yelling all manners of profanities in Vindematrix, the language of the caverns, is funny no matter how you look at it. You'd make a comment about how she's only so proficient at this because of all the times the Elders have sent her out here.

"Get your butt over here and help me!" she shouts at you, shortly before spearing one through the eye with her scimitar.

You laugh, but quickly put an end to three more of them with your shortsword.

"I thought you had it covered!" you shout back. "You said you had it covered!"

Zaniah drops her weapon, and turns just so she can make a rude hand gesture at you. She opens her mouth as if she'd like to say something, but...

Then, the sky falls. You duck for cover, choking on sand, watching your life flash before your eyes. Dust and sand find their way into your lungs, into your mouth, into your eyes. You cough and struggle to draw breath.

First Mother, you hate the surface of Alternia. Why is everything so deadly? You prop yourself up on one arm, find the sleeve of Zaniah's tunic, and tug her close, checking her for injury. Thank the Mother that nothing appears to be seriously wrong.

"What," she splutters. "What was that? A meteor shower?"

"I have no idea."

You think a few of your ribs might be injured from the force of your collision with the ground. Zaniah hauls you to your feet, and hands you her canteen. When your hands shake too much to open it, she upends the whole thing upon your head.

Once it's clear that you're more or less okay, just dizzy, Zaniah's back to her usual antics.

"Think they'll give us a day off if there's anything interesting in that crater?" she asks, pointing at the impact made by whatever fell from the sky.

Sweet Mother, your ribs hurt. Realizing that Zaniah wants to check this crater out, you fashion a makeshift walking stick from a bit of dead wood, and follow after her.

"Unlikely."

She quirks an eyebrow at you.

"Truly, you are the most optimistic troll I know. Where's your sense of adventure?"

You wince, both from the jibe and your injuries.

"Adventuring someplace, probably."

Zaniah speculates about the precious gemstones that must lurk in that crater. Gemstones from another planet. As if anyone in the caverns would have use for gems. You're not Imperials or anything. You find gems all the time. You're about to say something impolite to Zaniah, hobble back to the caverns, and ask an elder to brew you analgesic tea, when you hear it on the air.

The squalling cry of a young grub.

Judging from Zaniah's chatter, she hasn't heard it yet.

But a grub? All the way out here? So close to a crater? Mother only knows how injured it must be. How afraid. You'll probably have to cull it for injury - surely it must be in bad shape - but that doesn't mean it should suffer. You have your scimitar. You'll make it quick.

You drop Zaniah's canteen and dash over to the source of the sound, all pain forgotten.

"It's okay!" you cry out, in lilting Vindematrix, something that usually calms grubs. "I'm coming to help you!"

You climb down into the crater, toward the source of the squalling, expecting a grotesque sight to assail your eyes. Something that will give you nightmares for sweeps to come. Culling injured grubs is never pleasant. Once you find the grub in question, though, you're even more confused.

Except for a scratch across its thorax, it appears to be uninjured. However, that isn't all. It has the reddest body and eyes you've ever seen - so bright you could nearly mistake it for tyrian at first glance - a mutation, to be sure. You dig a bandage and a bit of antiseptic out of your tunic, and fix the grub up.

You sing to it until it stops crying, a lullaby about shallow pools and smooth stones.

(Thou shalt not suffer a mutant to live.

You know this. You know this.)

But when Zaniah raises her scimitar, and the grub lets out a screech of mortal terror, you block the blow with your own weapon. The grub scuttles up your tunic and into your hair.

"Come on, Porrim. If we get this over with now, we don't have to carry the thing back to the caverns to get culled there."

She's thinking of the paperwork. She hates paperwork.

You gently disentangle the grub's legs from your hair, and hold it so you can look it in the eyes. Those strangely colored eyes peer into yours and blink. The grub lets out a sound of contentment.

Something in your bloodpusher shifts.

You sigh. You do not want to eliminate this grub just yet. It doesn't seem right.

"Let's take it back," you say to your moirail. "The Elders should at least know about another mutant grub, so they can make a note of it."

Zaniah grumbles about your penchant for following the rules, but concedes the point.

"Just as well," she says, expression still sour. "I've done enough for today."

You snort, looking at all the dead revenants. Another few days in the high Alternian sun and they'll start to dessicate. Then more will find their way over, and another pair of unsuspecting but misbehaving acolytes or apprentices will get sent out to dispatch them.

You continue singing to the grub as you make your way back down to the caverns. You might as well comfort it before it meets its end. In return, it settles in your arms, yawns, and begins to doze.



*The Personal Investigation Notes
of Neophyte Redglare Case #228*

Skyeec2

The Personal Investigation Notes of Neophyte Redglare Case #228 – Skyeec2

Neophyte Redglare

Warnings: If you get a bit uncomfy when crime shows talk about causes of death then you should probably skip this over

‘Recordings discovered a number of years in a recently current Alternian timeline of one of the Neophyte Redglare’s Investigations.’

The screen flickers to life on a room.

Official and clean, coloured in various shades of teal and purple. An insignia is printed on the wall behind the figure in focus, one easily recognised as being the ancient sigil of the legislacerators.

The figure in focus is a troll-woman garbed in a long-sleeved teal bodysuit accompanied by an oddly cut scarlet red vest that when combined with a solid black band around her waist depicted a recognizable blood-clan symbol. She’s seated before the screen, eyes hidden by a sharp pair of scarlet-tinted glasses, black hair framing her sharp, pointed face in distinctively shaped sharp strands. Two horns sit upon her head, pointing skyward and diagonally away from the centre of her skull.

One of her hands, garbed again in her long scarlet red gloves, retreats from the top of the screen to clasp the other resting on the surface between the troll and the recording device; brown and wooden it can logically be contextualized as a desk by the presence of a file and a number of writing implements laid out on top of it.

“Personal Investigation Notes of Neophyte Redglare. Night One of Investigation #228; the case of the Gold-blood found deceased by the river in Sector 13 Area 4.”

Redglare is composed as she speaks, voice contained and bland as she recounts facts to the recording device set up in front of her.

“The victim was discovered in the hour approaching the Moons’ apex. Found fully clothed but missing identification tags as to her level,

designation and identity. Initial investigation of the meatsack showed a number of lesions and a large amount of bruising around the organ cavity.”

She paused, turned her head downwards and flipped through the file laid out in front of her.

Her face remains focused on the papers when she starts to speak again.

“Initial on-site investigation currently has C.O.C. as blunt force trauma to the organ cavity leading to the rupturing of the inhalation sacs.”

She lifted her face back to the recording device, hands moving to clasp each other on the open file laid out on the desk.

“Signs of a struggle at the site observed, noted and recorded. No reports of a disturbance heard in the earlier hours of the night by those around the area the meatsack was discovered. Further questioning of those in the area will be carried out. No evidence or clues as to the identity of the culprit were found at the site. Further investigation needed. Current hypothesis as to the culprit’s identity is the of another Lowblood.”

She unclasped her hands, one of them reaching forward towards the recording device before the scene ends in a sudden black screen and snow.

The next scene starts after a minute of static.

The screen opens to the same scenery as the previously, the walls are the same colour, the insignia remains, but the desk has a notable increase of files, loose papers, writing instruments and photographs strewn about it making it look much more cluttered than previously.

Redglare is there again, sitting in front of the recording device.

She appears more frazzled, not as put together as she had previously, and tenser in the set of her shoulders, the pinch of her brow and the twist of her mouth.

“Personal Investigation Notes of Neophyte Redglare.”

She sounds as tense as she appears, voice more clipped and stiff, formal and contained, almost unnatural in how lacking in emotion it is.

“Night Two of Investigation #228; the case of the Gold-blood found in Sector 13 Area 4. Further investigation of the meatsack confirmed prior theorized C.O.C; collapsed inhalation sacs as a result of blunt force trauma to the organ cavity. Identifaction was located further down the bank of the river the meatsack was found near and the Gold-blood has been identified as one Mocrom Warnob, rank C, psionic. Investigation into Warnob lead to the discovery of contact points in the form of a Moirail (Bronze-blood) and a Matesprit (Purple-blood).”

She takes a deep breath and holds it a moment before continuing.

“Moirail was able to be contacted and questioned regarding the victim. Matesprit was not. Moirail informs that—”

She cuts herself off.

Takes another deep breath before starting to speak again.

“Moirail informs that Matesprit had not always been kind to the victim; often taking advantage of their higher blood caste than the victim’s own in a variety of ways. Further investigation into this lead will be looked into but primary hypothesis as to the identity of the culprit remains another Lowblood.”

She leans forward again and the recording cuts off, screen going dark immediately.

The transition between scenes is longer this time. The static is louder, more drawn out and jarring to the ears.

The screen turns back onto the setting of the previous two recordings.

Redglare sits in front of the recording devices once again, glasses missing from her face which is buried in the palm of her hand, elbow resting on the surface of the desk whilst the hand that had turned on the recording device dropped onto the wooden surface of the desk, clenched into a loose fist.

She takes a deep, shuddering breath and speaks, voice clipped and full of barely contained emotion.

“Personal Investigation Notes of Neophyte Redglare. Night Three of Investigation #228; the case of the Gold-blood found in Sector 13 Area 4. Investigation has been ordered to cease by superiors. No more time, effort or resources is to go into the matter. The victim’s meatsack will be disposed of before dawn. The perpetrator behind the culling is unimportant within the context of the victim’s identity and the suspected identity of the perpetrator.”

She stops speaking and the recording lapses into silence for a number of minutes.

She shifts, rubbing at her brow with her palm before her hand falls to the surface of the desk, her other hand relaxing from the fist it had previously been clenched in.

She looked away from the recording device, away from the notes, files and photographs still strewn about her desk in a messy, chaotic order.

A furrow is clearly visible on her face as her gloved fingers tap on a singular loose piece of paper, the writing on it unseen by the recording device.

“Official Investigation has been terminated.”

She reaches forward and turns off the recording.

The screen cuts to black and static once more.

The wait is longer still than previously before the screen bursts into life one final time.

The scenery is completely different than all the other recordings before.

No longer is it the detached, clean and orderly office of the prior entries. Now it was darker, walls of plain dark colouring and without anything to indicate it as being a place of official work or standing.

There’s a cane at the side of the screen, resting against the back wall. Splashes of vivid purple are just able to be made out where the white head, carved

in the shape of a dragon's skull, meets the rest of the cane.

Redglare is sitting before the recording device once again.

She's missing her teal blue and scarlet red legislacerators's uniform and is instead garbed in a pair of dark, what looks to be coon-ready pants and a set of plain rumblesphere bindings.

Her head is turned towards the ceiling above her, spine leaning heavily against the back of the chair she's sprawled in, hands splayed out and hanging limply at her sides after turning the recording device on once again.

She takes a deep breath and releases it in a single, heavy sound, head lifting until she could look at the recording device, hair messy and eyes tired with noticeable dark bruises lying underneath them.

"Personal Investigation Notes of Neophyte Redglare."

Her voice is tired, completely drained of energy. But there's an undercurrent of satisfaction to it.

"Night Six of Investigation #228; the case of Mocrom Warnob who was found by the river in Sector 13 Area 4 after a disagreement with her matesprit turned deadly. Culprit has been identified, apprehended and Justice delivered for the victim. The Investigation is now closed."

She reaches forward and the recording cuts out once more into stillness and static before that too ends, leaving an empty blank screen with nothing else to share.



How Should I Presume

Auxanges

The best thing the world ever did for you was not give you fins. It's not that you don't appreciate the frivolous — indeed, what kind of pirate would you be if you didn't, even just a little bit? — but to have it handed to you the minute you hatch takes away from the satisfaction of it all. Victories are sugar-sweet when you pluck them from the grips of your betters. It clears your mind so you can sift through the minds of others; drugs and dead things are for highbloods and storm chasers.

Your name is Spinneret Mindfang, and as far as an increasing number are concerned, you're a storm worth chasing.

*

Your Gamblicants control a swath of southern ocean that slowly curls upwards, until the waves are choppy enough to snap at your crew's heels. From there, the Empire takes over: Dualscar doesn't bother with more than one sentry, because he's not completely stupid with resources. He has this funny insistence on earning you. On days it doesn't trigger your gag reflex, it pleases you greatly.

There's going to be a meeting soon. Your itinerary is full of *soons* and *laters* and *blink of an* eyes. No timepiece resides in your quarters, because the worship of time is for those with blood measured in hourglasses. You have seen your end in loose, backlit fragments: everything from here to there is an approximation.

You aweigh anchor from your desk chair, propping your boots on the wood while you lift your deckhand's arms to reel in the chain. Seldom few among your crew avoid your hooks, but it's not like they ever protest, not truly. Little fish, bigger pond.

Letting your good eye close (and the other one make a game effort), you loose a breath. It does not fog, but you feel the satisfying little crush of endorphins only voyages like this can give you. It's one of many ways you have amassed to feel alive over the sweeps. You collect them like the silver pieces in your hold.

No troll on this ugly rock does life quite like you.

*

So. Here is how you almost die.

You throw caution to the wind and let it catch in the sails of the frigate you're cutting your teeth on. You chart courses your shipmates shudder at, protesting with their eyes when you lock their jaws.

We have things to do, you say. Great things!

It's not a lie or anything. It's just lacking in certain specifics, for the time being.

Eventually, the resistance you feel at the base of your horns subsides; the sea rolls more violently underfoot. It's raining—not really out of the ordinary on your current corner of the map, with ugly greenish clouds folding back on themselves. You should really keep a log of weather, you think. You should also keep a log of all these great things that are absolutely, definitely going to happen, but you're only one captain with two hands and three dozen susceptible pans to rifle through.

The poncey shit loves to complicate things, which is not a department you need help in. (Never mind that inclement temperatures are not *technically* anyone's fault, but it's nice to have a choice scapebleatbeast to fall upon your sword.) You batten down when the first rogue wave roars into view, your chair screaming in protest before pitching sideways entirely.

Stomping above deck, each wet *thwack* louder than the last, you resort to your outside voice.

"I apologize!" you call to your crew. Your shoutbox is a little hoarse, which adds excellent effect when your crewmen aren't busy bending to your whim. "I hadn't realized my impaired vision was contagious! Or has anyone here actually managed to notice that the ocean wants to eat us alive?"

Many, many sets of oculars blink at you.

"I am not your goddamn lusus," you continue, running your hands through your soaked hair until your thumbs rest on your temples. The trolls closest to you sway in place, unrelated to the tempest. "I shouldn't have to hold your fucking hands until you [remember your posts!]"

Everyone's feet move with newfound purpose, hands passing over one another to lash down everything loose. You have three-eighths of a second of smugness before the next ten-foot whitecap smacks you over the railing.

*

Back when you were young and stupid, you believed the shit Dualscar fed you about sacrificing to the deep gods for fair winds. Then, when you got a little less young and a little less stupid (depending on the day, of course), you realized that was crap. Winds, like life, are never fair, and like to try ripping you new and exciting holes.

You tumble through the blackness of the sea. There is nothing warm here: few things in your course are ever warm, not your kismesis and not your flush dalliances, not the waters you chart and not the rye you choke down and not the metal fused to your shoulder. But as you try to right yourself, the only thing you can think of is heat—that kinetic mess of reds, yellows, colours that flood your dreams and a little too many of your hunches for comfort.

Like you said, not exactly fair. But it does remind you that you know your end.

You kick once, twice, and then the deep gods feel bad for you and boost you towards the surface. You toss a mental line back towards the first soul you can feel—no catch—you cast again, wider, and grit your fangs as you search for handholds in your recently acquired hull.

Your prosthetic is heavy, and your head, to your growing embarrassment, is rapidly joining the club. If you weren't on something sort of resembling a schedule, you would throttle the closest crewman the minute your boots hit solid ground again. Or maybe just the one who finally extends a hand to haul you the rest of your way up.

"Spin. You're early."

Scratch that. You're more than happy to throttle this one.

*

Dualscar picks up where you left off, securing your less useful trolls to the masts and railings before dragging you by the soggy coattails back to your quarters.

"Quit it," you grouse, brushing off the seadweller stink. "You'll stretch the fabric."

"You're lucky your pan's thicker than pack ice," he replies, rooting around in your cupboards for drink. You only keep it around because you know he'll look for it, just like he knows you'll only give him the worst alcohol for leagues around. Your arrangements are a pleasant certainty in your mess of non-specifics. "Any skull more fragile would've cracked the second it hit the waves."

"I don't believe that for a second, considering your delicate disposition is still comparatively intact."

"Har har." Dualscar takes a swig straight from the bottle before handing it over. You rub your sleeve over the lip before following suit. "You missed the sentry."

"No, I didn't." You gesture in a slow arc with the bottle. "You were gallivanting barely a mile out from us, what, forty feet below?"

He raises an eyebrow: the track marks over his features twist the expression in a way that suits him. "Whose suspicion did you pluck that from?"

"I don't kiss and tell, Ampora."

The scowl reappears, and he motions for the bottle. "You're welcome, and all."

"For giving me a boost?" You snort. "I have no plan to perish at sea. I'd rather...well, you know."

Dualscar snaps his gills in lieu of a laugh. "No wonder she agrees with you. Not many can convince her to spit 'em out again."

"My dear Orphaner, if there is anything you should know about me by now, it's that no one is more convincing than me."

"Aye."

You sit in silence for a while, him draining your last-rate sludge and you checking up on the goings-on above your heads. Observances of note: seven crew members acknowledge the worst of the storm is passing you, one recognizes your course as still determinedly trucking to the rendezvous, two wonder if you and the penultimate are gonna do it (you picked them up recently and decide to forgive them), and three are marvelling at the fact that you're even alive.

Doesn't the world get tired of not throwing you a bone every now and again?

"Spin."

"I'm tired," you say, because you are, and because as dense as he can play at being, Dualscar can take a hint. Reading minds all hours of the night means you have less time with your own than optimal, and accidental topples overboard tend to jump-start your monologues. "Go show my crew how to actually make themselves useful, will you?"

He stands and stretches. Both of you are getting old, but when you're in close company you feel like you just crawled your way free into moonlight. "Look alive, Serket," he calls over his shoulder in the doorway of your quarters. "It suits you better."

You flip him off with both hands.

Once he's gone, you toss the empty bottle to some forgotten corner and bring a lantern close. The wick catches almost instantly, and you watch the colours intermix, fighting for the top of the glass. You let out another breath; this one does mist.

There's paper in your desk drawer, somehow the only remaining dry thing aboard your ship. You root around for ink, pricking your finger on the pen's tip to dilute it to your swatch. Pirate you may play at, but social convention still exists out here.

Blood, you decide, is up there with wind and life.

You suck on your finger, switching hands for your implement, and begin to write.

Second apogee of the bright season.

It's raining.



*Then From Without There Came
a Gentle Rapping (a Tapping
Upon My Chamber Door)*

Onceewerezombies

then from without there came a gentle rapping (a tapping upon my chamber door)

By oncesewerezombies

Rated T.

Notes: References to canon events, canon-equivalent violence, hemocastism, Alternia is a nightmare, absolutely terrible horse puns

To the uninitiated and ignorant, it may seem that the Church of Mirth runs on clowning and miracles, narrowly skating from disaster to disaster but that would be only a shallow view of the institution as a whole. There is actually a lot of paperwork that goes towards making it run. A *lot* of paperwork.

Pressing your fingers into your temples, elbows propped on the wood of your desk, you wonder how most of it winds up on your administrativeplane. At least it certainly feels that way to you right now, you're always willing to put your strength foally into the traces and pull the load that's been given to you - but - surely this is just a little. Excessive.

You have the most tense and tender pan-ache. It's stuck right between your eyes, behind the bridge of your nose and you wish - you wish dearly that you had something to distract you. Something that would mean you didn't need to attend to these piles of paperwork. So much administrative nonsense...execution orders and writs, subpoenas and legal nonsense, page after page of Imperial edicts. All with the most terrible fish puns. You don't class your hoofbeast puns in the same class, of horse. Hoofbeasts are beautiful noble creatures, overflowing with purity of spirit - the ocean is just wet and full of terrible, dangerous things.

Terrible things like your Empress (may Her name be blessed).

You're bound to more landward-bound considerations at the marement, no matter the oceanic origin of some of your looming stack of paperwork. For once, it's less pressing than other issues that have landed on your nutritional plateau. There's something to be said for squashing an attempt at some sort of rebellious movement from the gutterbloods, mm hmm mm, all hail the Empire, but Flicka preserve you and grace your mane with ribbons but it does mean a lot of paperwork. Executions need to be scheduled, lowblooded scum sent hither and yon to places where their public demise will be a cause for local hilarity (and a certain sort of lesson, to those that need it), and before they die - they must be kept and fed and watered, which is a different course of logistics altogether. Gosh forfend that a single one should die before they meet their duly appointed, *legal* ending.

This is a society, there are a few rules that all should do their best to follow. The possibility that perhoofs there might be another way for things to work rises in your mind for a moment before you blink it away without another moment's notice. Nonsense. Just nonsense. Besides, you

have a certain amount of regard for your own health; far too much to consider the idea of being kind to those who justly deserve their lower stations in life.

Your name is Horuss Zahhak, but you haven't been known to trolls by that name in a long time. You are most likely now to be called by your title, Executor Darkleer. The first part is your duty that you are honoured to perform for the Empire, and the second part is...well. Outside of your personal administrativeblock, you are most likely to be seen wearing a set of goggles with darkly smoked lenses. Your own manufacture, of horse. They may seem unassuming but they are really something more than just what they appear to be. After all, a pair of light-protective ocularwear is one thing, but it's hardly the only thing you need to be able to do. And they correct a very small defect in your vision that you'd really rather not make known widely.

You're unlikely to be culled for it, considering your blood, the skills you've gained through an average length sort of life (so far). But you have also seen trolls culled for less. Best to just not make an issue of it, and turn the goggles into an affectation and minor point of pechersonality rather than something that was hiding a less than usefoal mutation.

You're fine. No one knows. It's not a thing. It doesn't impact on your ability to serve your betters or the Empire at large; you hardly think you need to disclose it.

Picking up one of the supply requisition forms from the top of the stack dispiritedly, you almost launch it into the air as you jolt in your seat from shock as the door to your administrativeblock SLAMS open. Flying wide to the point where it hits the wall behind the arc of its swing, and propelled there by - a truly large, muscular clown arm. Oh no. No, no no no.

Oh, why tonight, of all nights? Didn't he have something to do? He certainly should; this amount of paperwork meant that at least some of it should have ended up on his administrativeplane as well...unless. *Unless*.

That dirty, painted, cheating *wastrel* -

"My BEST and MOST MOTHERFUCKING pony-lovin' rrrrryda!" The voice of the Grand Highblood makes just as shocking and loud an entrance as the rest of him, the towering subjuglator bending down to fit his horns through the entryportal as he finangles his way inside your office. Oh, bother. Not now, not this. You flinch slightly at his roar of greeting, not exactly meaning to, but His Mirthfoalness has something of an *overwhelming* presence. Even now. Even after these many sweeps you've spent working in sometimes quite close contact with him. And after everything else he's done. He's a threat, and your lurking hindbrain knows it. "BOY, do I have a *motherfucking* job for you, Executor."

The fragile piece of paper you hold in your hand crumples in your suddenly clenched fist at his gleefoal tone, and you just know you've put your fingers through it. *Darn*. He always manages to get to you.

Sometimes he doesn't need to say a gosh fiddlesticking thing at all.

He grins jaggedly at you, tongue almost lolling from the corner of his mouth and you know that he knows what you're thinking. And that he thinks it's amusing. He enjoys the fact that you had such high ideals for those higher in blood than you when you joined the Archeradictators and how they didn't quite survive actually meeting highbloods in reality. You still grimly dedicate yourself to the idea of the hemospectrum hoofever. What else can you do? If people don't follow the rules, the laws both social and actually written that you all abide by, then there would be only chaos. And while you dislike the ongoing japery and buffoonery that characterizes the Subjugglator corps, you dislike the idea of the kind of social breakdown that would come of not respecting the way things are even mare.

Besides. As much as you are loathe to admit it and would neighver say so out loud, the clowns are actually...ugh...good at doing what the Empress needs them to do. It's better than working directly for seadwellers, you suppose. You're never quite at ease with anyone with fins; it's the fact that you and they both know in the darkness of ancestral hindbrains, exactly how many of your type were drowned to appease the appetites of theirs.

"Respectfully, your mirthfulness -" you start to say and he makes an ugly disparaging noise from the back of his throat. Uncharitably, you think he sounds like he's swallowed some of that disgusting mane he called hair and is now trying to cough it up. If he licks himself clean, you wouldn't be surprised. He really is harnessstly, just that disgusting.

"Oh, here we *motherfucking go*-"

"I think I have quite enough work to do," you grind on through your clenched teeth, looking back down at your desk. Maybe if you ignore him, he'll simply give up and go away? Perhoofs find someone else to nag. You can, of horse, only hope. "Thank you, your jocularity, but I believe I will pass on this generous...offer."

"C'mon, it's gonna be *fun*."

You don't actually have the chance to object much mare, since he grabs hold of your wrist and is pulling you out of your chair. He really does take the most *outrageous* liberties with your person. It's not out of the realm of reason that you could pull back, sit down and take your work back up but you're intrigued despite yourself. Also you'd probably pull his arm out of socket if you tried to physically object to the way he's troll-handling you about. It wouldn't be a very good look for someone of your caste, to bodily disable a subjugglator like that - let alone the Grand Highblood himself.

"I don't see how - watch out - this is going to be fun," you grumble as he drags you behind himself like a lusus with an errant wiggler who won't come to the meditorturner and get their recommended vaccinations and medicine. He barely manages to dodge the two subjugglators who for some mirthful known reason are carefoally carrying a plane of glass down the corridor, your warning coming just in time so he doesn't walk straight into the middle of the pair. *Why do they even have something like that here.* You will neighver understand clowns, no maretter how long you live among them. Golly, how nice would it be to be released from this onerous

obligation of your current courser of employment. No matter; you know your duty and as primary Executor for the Mirthful Court, it is better that you live where your superiors can make the most of your particular skill set.

One night, perhoofs...you might even get to retire. Or at least consider a change of career. It would be nice to have mare time for your hobbies, the robots and little mechanical marvels you relax with in your hiveblock at night. Simply just to be somewhere away from clowns; what luxury! What rare maneficence to consider!

You are very far away from having those kind of beneficent gods smiling on you, and you know it. If you believed in gods at all. Which you don't. You suppose that means you'll just have to deal with what is in front of you, for as long as it is there. And hopefilly, maybe...there will be another sort of life dumped in your manger at a later date.

"Why are we down *here*?" you demand to know with obvious contempt as the Grand Highblood leads you past the usual blocks and corridors that you habituate, down a long series of stairs to somewhere much...danker. Darker. Bloodier smelling. You can't help yourself, your nose twitches with disgust at the rank smells that soon rise to greet you as he pulls you in deeper and deeper to what are colloquially known as the suffering courts - the inquistormentor blocks. You come afterwards, once a guilt and a verdict have been established. You don't need to be here. You've never felt a need to even visit before this. There is a *process* -

"Hush, you big blue motherfuckedr," the Grand Highblood says with distraction evident in his tone of voice, but he still doesn't let go of your wrist. He shows quite an admirable show of STRENGTH, if you must be frank. You sweat uneasily into your jumpsuit and let him drag you depper. Ugh. There are quite a few lowbloods crammed into the cells here. It's one thing to see the numbers on administrative cellulose planes, it's another to confront the nasally challenging reality of what it means to have this many trolls crammed into this kind of space.

"Highblood-"

"I said *motherfucking hush*, so fucking shut it," he snarls out, and you obediently button your lip and just try to breathe shallowly. Ugh. This is *disgusting*. You suppose this area isn't well visited by the janiterrorist crew; what if they became mistaken for occupants of the cells that are going by on either side of you. Or perhoofs, if a cell occupant was mistaken for one of the cleaning crew. It could happen, you suppose. You know by bitter experience that subjugulators are not much for carefoal paperwork keeping or even the most desultory amount of administrative practice. Despite your best efforts otherwise.

This isn't where you're meant to be.

Silently now and without protest, you follow behind the hulking body of the subjugglator in front of you as you let him continue to drag you along by the grip on your wrist. You think, haphazardly, that this is the longest he's touched you in one single encounter since you met. Usually it's more of a, distracted thing. Moment to moment. And not prolonged. It's so unseemly,

and against both of your dignity. You'll just have to continue to suffer, because it's not as though the Grand Highblood seems to feel as though he has any dignity worth considering in his night to night life. As you well know.

"Are you going - hhk - to explain yet, what we are doing down here...*sir*," you pant through clenched teeth as he seems to be coming to something of a more thoughtful walk, than the headlong rush of before. These cells have their doors further apart, and they are much less crowded. The glowwurms are much further apart as well. You blink, waiting for your ocular-pieces to catch up with the new dimness. You are...quite a few floors underground at this point; some part of you had counted every spiralling staircase so you could figure out roughly just how many tons of earth and stonework are pressing down onto you from overhead. It's. Not helpfoal, you wish you could ignore that inner counting and minor rising hysteria. You don't enjoy being this deep. You don't want to say you're a creature of wide open spaces like the hoofbeasts you so admire, but it is most ashoedly your preference.

"Here we are," the Grand Highblood says with satisfaction as you reach a metallic sliding door set incongruously into corridor walls of rough stone, and he pushes his hand flat, palm-first against the silvery grasp-reader to the side of it. Every so often, clowns surprise you with what type of technology they deign to incorporate into their structures. "Let's talk to this heretic who's chilling his bitch ass out where a motherfucker can *finally* keep a sightorb on him, huh."

It's a small cell, not large. But by the lock on the door, you assume whoever is in there is important in some way, someone that the Church greatly desires to keep closely locked up and with very few trolls able to access them at all. The prisoner certainly doesn't look like much, square and dark, his hands fastened in front of him in chains and more chains anchoring his feet to the floor by iron manacles around his ankles. There's a bench of sorts, and straw. No sopor, you notice, flicking your eyes around - a drain in the corner, a tap that slowly oozed a slow trickle of water over it. Truly, a disgusting cell where you put someone to be forgotten.

Except the Grand Highblood hadn't forgotten *this* prisoner.

"This guy going around and stirring shit up, preaching like he got a right to do what the fuck he wants. Let a motherfucker tell ya real fucking quick - he ain't no *motherfucking* Messiah, he's just a very naughty boy." The Grand Highblood's hands come down hard on the shoulders of the chained troll in front of him, and the short-horned lowblood has the nerve to look pained. You hang in the opening of the doorway, looming uneasily. Unsure of your purpose here, and in this noisome cell with this criminal in particular. That the Highblood has a plan, you don't doubt. You suppose you just have to wait and find out what it is.

"To be fair, I didn't say I was anything important," the criminal says in a rough and tired voice. "I only offered trolls a different way."

"Motherfucker, you know what you fucking did and don't offer words of denial now you been *caught* and sentenced to motherfucking *REPENTENCE* for your crimes," the Grand Highblood

scolds, his rumbling voice carrying out into the small confines of the cell like he has a whole mirthful chapel to project to. You wince as subtly as you know how to; the prisoner just winces. Then again, you suppose that the foal force of that immense voice had been right next to his auricular clot.

"You know, I thought you'd be a lot quieter than you actually are," the lowblood has the nerve to say, and you hiss through your teeth in a shocked inhale of reproach. How could he speak to someone so many shades above him like that? You don't...even quite know what shade that is, the bright red stitched into the leggings that come up to his armpits. You assume he's a rustblood, or something like that. The Grand Highblood would scarcely dare do this to someone higher than him, and what sort of troll wore a colour so warm and bright as *that*, without being somewhere in the neighbourhood of it? Absolutely depraved, it's almost imperial scarlet and who would have less of a right to wear it than a traitor. *Disgusting*. At your hiss, the lowblood criminal has the nerve to look *amused*. What gives him the right? He even dares to look you in the eye, before obviously directing his next remark straight at you. "But I'm pretty sure you're exactly what I expected."

"You casting eyes over my *motherfucking* Executioner?" the looming subjugglator says to his prisoner (prey) almost jovially, and you can see his fingers flexing. Obviously working his claws into the flesh of the troll he's leaning down onto in a most threatening marenner. The criminal barely winces. "Signless mutant fuck as you are, cast your *motherfucking* gaze on my *dealer of death* and motherfucking *despair*, for he's to be the one to bring your right and proper FUCKING end."

Oh. You guess his blood really is that colour.

"I always endeavour to serve, my lord," you say into the silence as the reverberations of the Grand Highblood's exhortations simmer away into the thick walls of the cell. Goodness. He certainly did feel most *strongly* about this prisoner in particular, over any other prisoner being held in Mirthful power. You don't remember him having been this...personally involved before. Everything about this feels very. *Personal*. You don't want to be here, lingering and observing whatever the heck this is. It can't be flirtation. It's something else. It's something worse. The grin on his face only seems to stretch wider, almost rivalling the arched shape of his sacred paint. "What would you have me do?"

For now, you decide that ignoring the criminal sitting between you would be the proper course of action, for this increasingly intolerable situation. You'll keep your attention on the Grand Highblood, your mootual superior. As is proper. That should be enough. You shouldn't have to pay attention to anything the lowblood says. It just won't be relevant.

"You're gonna take some motherfucking measurements of this *loud ass motherfucker*, and get to making me some real cuffs," the subjugglator dominating the situation purrs, and the smile on his face is sick and satisfied. The criminal only looks resigned, like he knows what is coming in

some way. Somehow. How could he possibly know? Maybe the Grand Highblood has been boasting, before he brought you down here. "I want these motherfuckers to be the *shit*, understand me, Zahhak? Before you bring him down with one of your fucking arrows, I want to see this motherfucker *burn*."

"...I believe I can work with that, Your Jocularly," you say, pushing your goggles uselessly with the tip of your index finger, as though you needed to push them back into place. It is, of horse, to laugh at the mere idea. Your goggles are steadfastly fixed where you require them to be for exemplary vision. It's more of a nervous habit, left over from when you were young and you hadn't been quite as precise as you needed to be. Goodness, what a long time it has been since then. So much road has passed under your hooves from what suddenly seem like simpler, easier nights. A time before clowns, certainly. "When does this need to be completed by?"

"Tomorrow."

You start to splutter a little, shocked by his casual tone and the sudden project the immense subjugulator has thrown in your lap with no warning. No fanfare. No *appreciation* of your work, that's what it is really. Hoofnestly! As though you have nothing else to do then wait around on his whim! As though you weren't already having to plough through reams of imperial documents to do with all of this, and half of which you are starting to wonder are really your responsibility at all.

The prisoner laughs, a hoarse little chuckle before he wipes at his eyes. Your shoulders go back, head reared back in unconscious mimicry of an outraged specimen of the hoofbeasts you so admire, and you stare down the length of your nose at him.

"Is this somehow funny to you?" you inquire frostily, and you ignore the Grand Highblood. He finds everything funny, in one way or another. Apparently this is one of the benefits of being beloved of the Mirthful Messiahs. You don't really agree but then again, you're hardly a subjugulator. You give utterance to the required amount of doctrine since you're surrounded by the fine upstanding fellows, but you're a staunch atheist. In your deepest parts of your pusher.

The Grand Highblood laughs uproariously, cutting off whatever comment the prisoner might see fit to make. You're still bristling and unsettled, but the subjugulator that controls the fate of you both seems quite pleased with the amount of pandemonium he's set off in the cell. Mostly it belongs to you, you're not sure that this heap of rags has enough energy left to rouse any sort of strong emotion at all.

"I'm sure you'll motherfucking *manage*, Darkleer." He gets up from his stance behind the prisoner, and comes around to where you're still standing at the entryportal. Struckdumb with encroaching horror of possibly missing deadlines, and not giving your uttermost to the Empire in general. What - how can he ask - A heavy hand comes down hard on your shoulder, and if

you were a weaker troll, you would have buckled at the knees and gone to the ground. "Don't disappoint me, motherfucker."

And with that, he's gone. Leaving you with this quaint little problem of just how you're meant to meet his expectations in less than a full cycle of the timepiece. You...oh *fiddlesticks*.

"I suppose I might as well get started," you say with ill grace, not needing to hide your dislike for this entire situation in front of the prisoner. What does it matter? From what the Highblood was saying, he'll be dead before the next night is out. You don't usually meet those slated to die; it's more of a fronds-off situation. You appear, you brandish - you shoot. Finis. You don't approve of this sudden change, but there's no point making an issue of it. You'll do your duty, as you always do.

Closing the door behind you, even though the prisoner seems to be well secured, you step closer to the table and look down at him along the length of your nose. You don't think he really feels the weight of your disapproval as you'd like him to.

"Did you ever think about *not* becoming a clown goon?" the prisoner says, obviously trying to get under your skin and you ignore him as you creakily get down to your knees so you can study his wrists. You've got an idea, and you think you can manage it in one day. You're going to be trembling on the verge of exhaustion tomorrow; but that will of horse have no effect on your ability to carry out your duties. Nothing does. "You had the choice at some point, didn't you?"

You ignore him, and reach for one of his hands. He jerks it out of the way and grins at you, displaying rounded teeth. Even rustbloods have more fang than this. This *nuisance*.

"Did you?" he repeats, as though you have to answer his question now that he's holding what you want in a way that's a little inconveniently out of reach.

"Don't be insufferable," you snap and for some reason he looks *delighted* at your choice of words. Why? You don't know, and you decide with solid determination not to care. You huff a sigh down the length of your nose, and hold your hand. "Give me your hand before I break your wrist. Your choice, criminal scum."

"Ah, but the clown lord might be a little displeased if you break me before he gets a chance to," he goads, and you feel a ripple of distaste run down your backbone as he continues to withhold his hands and wrists by placing them up on his shoulders. Only nominally out of reach for you, but you're cautious of your strength around those lower in blood than you. Looking him in the eye, you can see the burning crimson of his irises. Such a vile colour. So animal. No wonder he'd tried something so foolish as rebellion; his entire existence was a treachery against the Empire.

"You will cooperate, or we will see if His Mirthfulness is pleased to accept a mutant with a broken wrist," you say frostily and you can see him gauging just how likely you are to do it. You just stare at him, expressionless. You're aware of the effect you have on trolls. Eventually, he does bring his hands down in reach of yours and you distastefully direct him to lay his hands flat on the table so you can measure his wrists and the lengths of his forearms.

"Didn't you mean His Mirthfoa/ness," the criminal says, and your hands still for a moment despite your stern admonishment to yourself to not let him see how he's getting to you. A lucky guess, that's all. You're scarcely the only blueblood around with a fondness for hoofbeasts; it's a stereotype. It's not as though you're a wiggler anymore, so even if you still think in puns - you rarely say them these days. Sometimes, you miss that.

"Be quiet and allow me to do my work in peace," you grunt, because you don't want to hear another fiddlesticking word that will come from that mouth. Despite how worn he looks, and the distinctly odorous smell of nights on the road and so on that are afflicting your sniffnode, he seems to have plenty of energy enough for making himself into a fly nipping at your tender hindquarters. As though having the Grand Highblood doing so wasn't quite enough for anyone.

He does quiet down, even though you weren't expecting him to do so and you get your measurements. A series of carefully timed double-blinks and you take pictures of his wrists and hands, up his forearms. You rub your thumb against the inside of his wrist, not thinking much beyond how much work you have to do before dropping his hand like a hot coal when he chuckles softly.

"Don't be such a stick in the mud, Executor," he chides, as though he has the right to do so. You look at him through the smoked lenses of your goggles, and silently loathe him. What about him has driven the Grand Highblood into such a frenzy? Why did trolls listen to him? He didn't seem like that much, now you were seeing this rebel instigator face to face. It had taken you a long moment, beset with indignation as you had been with the Grand Highblood's pronouncement. "Why don't you stay and talk for a while? I don't think I have a lot of time left for conversations."

"You do not. I am however, not inclined to be your conversational partner."

"Oh but we're having such a great time together. Why not?" he chuckles, and your fingers spasm, clenching tight around his wrist. He hisses softly and you recall yourself, withdrawing your grip and pushing yourself away from the table as you rise to your feet. You've completed the work you needed to. No need to linger. "Aren't you curious at all, Horuss?"

That name strikes you like a lightning bolt, and you stand shocked still for a moment in the doorway. How does - when did he learn that name? You look back at him, and the slight curve of a smile makes something utterly *loathsome* rise up in your thorax for a moment. You throttle it back with weary ease, too used to the buffoonery of clowns to rise to the bait of a freak and a traitor. A provocateur.

"No. Not at all," you say solidly, and you leave the noisome little room and its lonely occupant with your measurements and your pictures. That should be the end of this; you stay up late in your workshop to create a set of self-heating manacles. The pain should be quite intense. You think the Grand Highblood will be quite pleased with the outcome you've managed to engineer in such a short space of time, no matter how unaesthetically pleasing the heavy, cumbersome manacles are. You even manage to get a few hours worth of sleep, before you're roused to step onto the execution grounds.

Your bow is heavy across your back with your quiver, weighted down with heavy blue-steel pointed arrows. You're wearing your best uniform. The sand crunches under foot, and you bow briefly to the palanquin of the Empress, then to the stand where the Grand Highblood is standing. Your gaze roves across your work, looking over the mutant tied to the pole, arms above his head before your attention is directed to the group to the left.

A Jade. A Yellow. An Olive.

You meet the tortured gaze of the oliveblood as she screams for the mutant hanging on his flogging jut and something in you. Something.

Breaks.

Everything goes wrong after that.

You lose everything that ever mattered. You gain nothing of value. Yet. After once meeting her tear-filled eyes, you could never have chosen another path.

Your name is Horuss Zahhak, but you haven't been known to trolls by that name in a long time. You were once called Executor Darkleer, and it was a term that came with respect. Now you're called the Expatriate. And you are alone.

You are so very, very alone.



*Warden of a Prison for
the Mind, Body, and Soul*

Skyeec2

Warden of a Prison for the Mind, Body and Soul – Skyeec2 The Grand Highblood

Warnings for The Grand Highblood, Clowns, Religious Clown, Murderous Religious Clowns :o)

‘When a motherfucker rips his own pan open to hear those most blessed and sacred of Church teachings, then he opens himself up to be put to his proper use :o)’

*Twisted bodies left to rot in the streets
Turning labyrinths a thought and terror with no chance of escape
Pans shattered and broken by the Mirthful whims of the Messiahs on High
His and others bare to them for their most righteous a judgements*

The Grand Highblood of Alternia’s Mirthful Church, one Kurloz motherfucking Makara to those that lived to be blessed with the knowledge of it, was... the most righteous of motherfuckers. Ain’t ever was another motherfucker that was as dedicated, as motherfucking devote as he was. Ain’t no one ever had a touch more refined, more designed and fated to be reaching into the pan of the most motherfucking blasphemous, the most wretched of the wretched and non-believers, to tear them all kinds asunder.

And perhaps he’d practiced on those he wasn’t supposed to have ever wanted harm upon, perhaps he’d turned his Chucklevoodooos upon Church kin and those of like colour or those that were meant to be the nearest and dearest to his pumper, but there was no place for such reservations when a motherfucker had been all kinds a fucking blessed with a purpose straight from the Messiahs’ maws. A kinmate, a pale or red bitch broken, shattered and thrown away was a small price to pay for what the Messiahs had decided he was destined for, what they all on high had motherfucking decreed.

And perhaps still, the Messiahs had called upon him to tear open his own pan, to bleed in both the physical and mental planes alike for them, to open himself to their whispers and mutterings so that they could guide he and his kin alike into

greatness and that flourishing mirthful bliss that was so motherfucking owed to them so that the world may be ripe for the Messiahs to lay all to motherfucking waste as they so decreed. As was motherfucking assured and decided upon long before the Church was even a creation given thought and form.

The Messiahs could and had called on Kurloz for any motherfucking thing of imaging and he would and had answered with claw and tooth, club and voodooos at the ready to do what they were needing of him. What the Church was needing of him.

He'd torn apart the previous Grand Highblood for them. The blasphemous motherfucker that was set on bringing all kinds a motherfucking shame onto the Church by agreeing to do as the Empress on deep and cold decreed with no care to faith or honour or anything that made the Church so much better than the motherfuckers good for no more than paint on their walls. He hadn't been expecting one a his own to turn against him, foolish and arrogant in all kinds a ways that made him worse than what was needed for the Church. He hadn't expected Kurloz, young as he'd been, to pull a pumper frozen by the horrors of endless wrathful ages from his chest cavity and parade it around the Church as was his own most sacred of motherfucking rights.

Kurloz hadn't been able to free his kin from the Tyranny's claws, but at least they weren't being shepherded into decay by someone that should have motherfucking known better.

Then there came the call for the hideous little heretic, imbued with the most miraculous and holiest a colour that were meant to be the most motherfucking sacred of the Church. Kurloz had relished the hunt for it, blasphemous fool talking about peace and equality, of choice and kindness, like a fucking wriggler that ain't ever learned its place in the proper order of the world around it. There wasn't any place for questioning or rebellion on Alternia, not if he and his most holy of brothers and sister, carrying their Messiahs wants and wishes, had anything to say about it. The little heretic and its collection of stains onto history weren't allowed to exist long past their capture.

Kurloz had witnessed the execution himself, ordered his most loyal and honour-bound of motherfuckers to carry out the holy deed all personal like, made an

example of it all so that any other thought of rebelling or questioning were stamped out in a single show of Highblood might. The terror of it had been the best kind a miracle; a brew all the Messiahs' own design mixing from the heretic's dying breaths, its disgrace of a Jade and the two Lowblood companions that thought they could deny the fate that had chosen for them, even the sweetest of concoctions ain't been able to even dream of holding a candle to it.

Would have been better if his most disgraced and expunged of Executioners had carried through with his orders and slew the Olive where she knelt, but Kurloz would deal with him another day. Ain't no one that had ever been able to escape the ire of the Church yet, they would tear him apart eventually. Kurloz could feel it in his pumper that the Darkleer's horns would be a motherfucking adornment to his throne before Kurloz was passed from this world, certain as the Alternian moonrise.

After the blasphemous heretic came the Messiahs' call for the Orphaner. Or maybe not. It was hard to tell what was the Messiahs' most motherfucking sacred of orders and what was his own rage at the Sea-Dweller thinking himself so above them that he could just stride his way into his most blessed and sacred of throne rooms, hand Kurloz the knowledge that he'd been in the knowing of where exactly a criminal of Church and Ocean was hiding herself and expected to be able to get off free of consequence. A stint like that might have worked amongst the bottom-feeders of the deep but Kurloz was having none of it. The Sea-Dwellers thought themselves better than the Church, thought that a flutter of their fins and a display of gills would be all it took to get the Church to do as they wished.

Kurloz was motherfucking delighted to prove a notion such as that wrong. The violet looked all kinds a pretty on the walls of his throne room and mixed with the looks on the faces of the next bottom-feeders thinking him and his kin tame and under control, well it was almost worth the loss of his Neophyte.

But such was the motherfucking price for bringing forth the version the Messiahs sung of in tunes of starlight, horror and bleeding.

Then the Messiahs fell silent, fell silent and plotting and planning as the world continued to progress towards what they were wanting of it, towards the vision Kurloz was the most motherfucking proud to be able to bring to them. But then the

blasphemous winged rebel maker showed his hand and Kurloz was set on his way to tear him apart, rip the hideous abnormalities from his spine and the questioning from his pumper until he was well-behaved and brought back into the Empire's purpose for him.

Or he'd cull him.

Kurloz wasn't the most picky of motherfuckers and if fate turned to wanting the winged-abomination and his assisters erased from the world (and hello to you Neophyte-culler your presence has been all kinds a noticed don't you worry none he'll be getting to you destroyer of one of the Messiahs' faithful tools before too long) then who was Kurloz, so motherfucking devote and dedicated to the Messiahs and what the Church was all kinds of striding towards, to deny their wanting?

Wouldn't be a motherfucking gentletroll if he weren't to do what was asked of him, would he? And who was he to start playing at being a faithless motherfucker this late into the way of things? Wasn't proper of him to question the want of the Messiahs, so Mirthful in their Mercy and Condemnation in kind, wasn't proper of him to do anything but bring those that wandered from the truth and reasons of things back into the places they were supposed to be motherfucking content in occupying.

Kurloz had a purpose; had a set of instructions, rules and operations whispered to him in dreams and visions that were in need of following and motherfucking completing before the world was ushered all sweet like into what the Messiahs had shown through the dreaming of those motherfucking blessed enough to have seen it.

But Kurloz wasn't gonna be the one alive to see things brought into the Messiahs' vision.

And that was all kinds a motherfucking fine.

He wasn't gonna be the one that ushered in the Mirthful destruction and mayhem that the Messiahs were all up and promising them, but he was gonna be laying all kinds of motherfucking groundwork, that most motherfucking solid of foundations, for those that would be there, the ones that would motherfucking serve and work

towards the Messiahs' wants and desires and he wasn't gonna be there but he'd be overseeing the miracles slotting into their right proper places from his guaranteed place amongst the Grand Highbloods of years gone past within the highest of honours of the motherfucking Dark Carnival.

He'd be watching as the Church was led onwards to the Messiahs' great vision, watching and reveling in all the motherfucking things to come as his brothers and sisters offering the world and all they were to the Messiahs as they were all up and motherfucking supposed to. Kurloz had decided upon it, had worked towards it during the entirety of his existence, torn apart rebellions and the most blasphemous of heretics the fates had to throw in the way of what was to be And there wasn't any motherfucker that was gonna be stopping him now.

No. Not any motherfucking heretic, not any motherfucking rebellious little mutant, not even the motherfucking Empress spreading her endless depths a tyranny out to the farthest reaches of space could bring a halt to what was to come.

He would make sure of it.

*Come all ye and hear their most sacred a teachings
Fall into place and find all ya motherfucking contentedness
Quell that rage in your chest and be rid of thoughts a questioning
Else you find yourself within the embrace of the roads and stalls of the Dark
Carnival most motherfucking divine*



At the Whims of the Sea

Skyeec2

At the Whims of the Sea – Skyeec2

Orphaner Dualscar

Warnings for a complete lack of nautical puns

'When one's life is dictated by the ebb and flow of a power greater than anything one can create, you kind of figure out there's no need to worry about much else beside that.'

The Orphaner Dualscar had a busy lot in life, well-earned and exactly what he'd always wanted and worked towards but busy all the same.

It was a difficult task to keep on top of all his many responsibilities and duties when the sway of the Ocean's tides and currents were never as forgiving as one would like them to be but, in his most humble of opinions, he felt his long sweeps of existence at his disposal to assist him in getting through life and his duties in kind. So that he may continue to perform to the best of his abilities, better than the best of his abilities even as they never had been up to snuff, and continue to prove that he'd earned his position and place on the mortal plane as fleeting as they may be.

Which only made returning to the whisperings of a potential up and coming rival, as side-splittingly hilarious as it was that these wrigglers would even dare to think to claim being anywhere near equal standing, following him through the halls of the submerged docks.

"... already with a ship of his own..."

"... 3 lusii in this extended cycle alone..."

"... the Officials have even put in a good word for him..."

Oh yes, impressive feats each and every one of them. Without the much-needed context behind each that would give any real merit or worth for consideration.

How had he acquired his ship? Had he built it with his own claws? Stolen it from another troll? Had he gained it through mutiny? Had he found an abandoned ship with no one to contend his claiming of it? Or had it been handed to him along with that good word? Had fortune and luck joined to simply hand the opportunity to him upon a platter of silver fish scale?

He certainly hadn't earned it like Dualscar had; hadn't worked his way from the bottom rung up to a captaincy all of his own. Hadn't lucked out the way Dualscar had at being the most senior onboard when the previous captain had been lost to the ocean waves. Really, trolls should stop being so impressed with

the notion of a troll having a ship to their name; Mindfang did after all and she was the lowest of the low, completely undeserving of the honour and prestige of having a ship, an entire crew, under her command.

As for the lusii, there'd been numerous times Dualscar himself had returned with a number of them for Gl'bgolyb. Just another matter of lucky timing and good fortune, which so many seemed to both wilfully ignore and overlook in kind.

"... going to do about 'im?"

He paused at the voice much closer than the passing whispers had been, turning his head and looking down at the younger troll at his back. As close to a second-hand as Dualscar would allow himself to keep; loyal only as far as it was in his favour to be and waiting for the first scent of blood in the water to turn on him, just as the rest of them were.

His fins fluttered as he considered the question, knowing better than to dismiss it out loud else he make himself a potential target for no reason. "As long as he is performing his duties in an admirable fashion then there is no reason to bother w-with him. The Empress and Gl'bgolyb are, at all times, our most important priority."

"Yeah," his second was younger, prouder, had yet to have that flame of aggressive territorialism beaten out of him by the cruel, uncaring tides of the Ocean and the Empress' utter disregard towards those that worked tirelessly to ensure that her monstrosity of a lusus remained fed and silent in the deepest reaches of the oceans. "But what if he makes moves against us? How are you going to answer that?"

"W-what a w-wrigglerish question," Dualscar scoffed, turning away to continue his stride through the halls, steps measured and even, unhurried and practiced, just the right length to them to indicate exactly how foolish he thought the question without making it too difficult for his second to keep pace if he wished to continue the conversation. Which, from the increased, quickened footfalls behind him, the younger troll did.

"If this w-would be Orphaner w-wishes to try his hands at sailing w-with the real sea-faring folk then he is w-well w-within his rights to try to." Dualscar wouldn't mind a weak attempt at actual competition for once, if the wriggler could last on the ocean long enough to pose anything like a threat at all. No matter how imbued this young upstart turned out to be with natural talent and standing within the collection of Sea-Dweller society the upstart was, the Ocean was a cruel mistress, cold and uncaring, and if at any moment she decided that a troll's time was up then there was little one could do to change her mind.

It took a certain touch to navigate the Ocean, one trained under years of command and one that didn't come pre-packaged in a troll's genetic makeup.

"You're really just going to let him be? Are you sure that's a smart thing to do?"

He kept himself focused forward, carefully keeping his features blank else the other troll catch wind of his irritation and the clear, singular moment where his decision to be rid of the younger troll was reached. There was no reason to clue the other troll in to the fact the Dualscar would start to make moves towards his permanent dismissal from his duties as second-hand to their ship soon enough; the troll still held a wealth of knowledge he could use to ruin Dualscar if he were give both the chance and opportunity to.

With a new upstart making waves in the waters it was best to remove potential threats to both himself and his position as quickly as he was able to.

"W-we aren't like those land-bound sav-vages, there's no need for infighting w-when it can be av-voided. The Ocean's big enough for the tw-two of us to nev-ver cross paths for the entirety of his v-voyage."

Up until the new troll in question decided that it might be an idea to weasel himself into Dualscar's waters, but that was implied and hardly needed to be spoken out loud.

It seemed to appease the troll following him though as he quickly fell silent and chose not to question Dualscar further on the matter of the new upstart for the rest of the journey through the halls.

They weren't planned to be docked long, just enough to unload what lusii Dualscar had managed to secure for the Gl'bgolybe and restock their own supplies before setting back out onto the endless expanse of space and waves that was the Ocean.

Which was exactly what Dualscar wanted. He didn't want to deal with being on land, even if the halls of the Sea-Dweller port were mostly submerged beneath the waves themselves. There was a difference, subtle as it was, between the true freedom of open, endless water and the simulated, contained nature of the submerged buildings Sea-Dwellers created to accommodate their needs.

One of those differences being the attitude of the trolls around him even though Dualscar had long since lost whatever care he might have had towards the fact that he would never be as respected as some of the others due to his lack of natural talent and the fact that he'd earned his rank and station through his own hard work and dedication instead of having it gifted to him.

He cared little for them and their ideals, they mattered not when it came to the task of sailing and manoeuvring a ship through waves, storms and the beasts that lurked far from the laws of the lands, both troll and beast alike.

So let the new upstart come if he so wished to, Dualscar would gladly see the Ocean swallow him whole just as it would the corpse of his soon to be de-ranked second.

The Ocean was wide enough for them both if the upstart had any sense about him, and if not then she'd decide who would come out on top of this faux rivalry when the time came for her to, impartial and uncaring as she ever was and so very, very alike their Empress herself.

Praise be to her name.

~

When he next returned to port, a new second at his shoulder, it was to a noticeable absence in rumours and whispering about that young violet that had held ambitions at becoming his rival.

"He must've run into a bit of trouble out on the water?" His new second, a violet she-troll of fewer sweeps than her predecessor had been, commented her fins fluttering softly as if trying to find some muttering of the other troll's fate.

"V-very likely," Dualscar agreed, barely resisting the urge to press at the fact that he'd been so very correct in his assumption that the little would be Orphaner would not last long upon the actual Ocean herself, certainly not to the extent Dualscar himself had anyways. "A shame. I w-was looking forw-ward to a change of pace for once. Seems w-we'll hav-ve to w-wait for another opportunity to show-w our merit, w-won't w-we?"

"Yes Captain, we'll get another chance soon enough." His new second was much more polite and orderly than his previous had been, another added bonus to the new arrangement. Definitely enough to make up for the fact that his previous second hadn't even had the opportunity to learn of this development and change his tun regarding it before the Ocean took him.

A shame indeed.



Time Passing

Mocaxe

It is Her Imperious Condescension's wriggling day, and she's not sure why she keeps track anymore. A couple thousand years ago she lost track of exactly how old she's been getting. Ran out of space for the candles on the grubcake, as it were. As much as she enjoys celebrating herself, the Condesce has been trying to do away with such trivial mortal things as age and wriggling days. Best to keep trolls guessing at her *exact* proximity to godhood. Among the list of stupid numbers to keep in your head, her age seems to make the top three.

The better number to think about would be the age of her empire, glorious in its warmongering, tight in its control. It's worth more than herself – though not by much. The running of it is something that used to take a lot more work than it does now. When pesky rebels made life a slight thrill, and it wasn't everyone she met who could be ground under her heel like the mulch in their veins. Now, she need only wave a bejewelled hand and at least five trolls stumble over each other to do her bidding. Drones perform the culling. She has the most extensive army in the universe to fight her battles.

She has total control over an autonomous system.

It's boring as *hell*.

Honestly, as much as she complains, this endless conquest has done something to hold off the inevitable tide of... well, nothingness. Alternia is old news, full of children who bicker and play at being adults until their time comes to serve their ever-expanding home. The Condesce, generous as she is, gives them free rein over most of their activities until their youth has completely wasted away.

Her own youth, of course, is long gone, fraught with responsibility as it was. When she was little, the Condesce often dreamt of running away from that planet – and she did, she supposes, as she lounges on her throne. She's about as far from Alternia as anyone had ever been. She's running farther and farther, pushing that bond with her *lusus* as far as it will go, pushing herself as far as she will go. Seeing how far she can get away from the monotony of responsibility before it all blows up in her face. Literally.

Just a little farther.

She whispers this to herself often, every time her soothing connection with her home planet feels a little too tenuous, every time she feels she's stepping a little too close to the tipping point, spreading her empire too thin. Just a little farther. She can do it – she can do anything – she's practically a goddess, practically, and reality will snap before she does.

-

Eventually, reality snaps. At least, hers does.

When the Alternian empire falls, burnt to a fine ash by a meteor rain, the Condesce is surveying the endless expanse of uncharted space before her. It is empty, and dark, and lifeless. Her ties to her *lusus*, as faint as it now is, have been straining like elastic pulled far too far. She has relied on her heiress to keep its songs at a whisper until the Condesce can return - so when the elastic breaks, the momentum of it slams into the Condesce like a hammer to the heart. She gasps. With no descendant, even Her Imperious Condescension can sense Gl'bglyb's hums rise into a crescendo, deafening, overpowering. The faint sounds of activity outside her quarters cease. Her *lusus'* scream is still ringing in her ears. Her ship judders to a halt.

In the resulting dead static, the Condesce realises she is alone.

She finds her battery, her cherished pet, the only other troll who has stayed with her throughout the sweeps. He'd been so loyal. So useful. So entertaining. And now, so very dead. Her perfectly manicured hand finds its way to his cheek, and she rests it there, feeling his cold skin with muddled yellow blood dried on top. He was an eternal prize - at least, she figured he would be eternal, slogging through the sweeps as long as she was here - and while all of his little rebel friends perished outside of her reach or care, she can only assume he wept for them. That assumption, reassuring as it is, does little for her now, his tears replaced with blood, his face still and eased of the strain that she'd come to associate with him.

Without her battery, alone and more afraid than she'd ever care to admit, she set course for Alternia. During those sweeps she could only imagine the planet that would await her. Every step the Condesce had taken to protect her grand empire had led it surely to its doom. She finds herself wondering if the rebellion would find some kind of sick poetic justice in this, or whether they would mourn as she does.

If they were around.

When her ship finally touches ground, Her Imperious Condescension sets high-heeled foot on the planet she's been running from for all these sweeps. She lays a perfectly-tailored blanket of numbness over the emotions that bubble to the surface when she walks over a fine layer of ash, and the blinding pink of her shoes is blackened. Noticeably, there aren't as many small decayed corpses littering the place as she thought there'd be. There are a lot more craters than she thought there'd be.

She passes heaps of rubble and debris which used to be cities, and tries to imagine what they were like before. She imagines a flurry of activity, the occasional scream from a low-blood who found themselves on the wrong side of a weapon, and a population of children bound by duty and steadfast loyalty to her. All she sees are more uniform piles of rubble. The occasional crater, which she has to walk around. In the distance, the only sign of life she's seen for six hundred and twelve sweeps.

A figure. Standing tall. Watching her.

When Her Imperious Condescension faces the Handmaid, the world is silent. The Handmaid has spoken few words, but they were possibly the most important words the Condesce had ever heard. In them lay something she both rejected and craved above all else: a new purpose. When they clash, the world is still silent, save for the ringing of weapons and the heavy breaths they take. It's a tough fight, but eventually, the Handmaid falls. As she knew she would.

The Condesce stands alone with one more corpse at her feet, and for once, she feels sorry for it. Under her breath, she makes a promise. Her empire will return.

-

Over the next era, the Condesce is a servant to someone whose only desire is destruction. Where she once wanted to create, he wants to tear it down. The point of breaking things and people is to build them back up into something better, she always thought; so she tries to build.

In the floods of what people once called Earth, she attempts to build. There are drones and carapacians and some dull attempts at trolls and lusii. There are humans, and there is another small rebellion to conquer.

Eventually, when Her Imperious Condescension faces some very determined, very broken children, she will think back to the adults who gave everything to throw a wrench in her plans, and she will see the resemblance. She will feel her age weigh heavy on her shoulders, the last of her kind (but not really, and that makes it even worse), as she stares down a young Dolorosa.

She wonders often if those rebels are watching their descendants, and if they're happy with what they see.

Eventually, long into her experiment with turning Earth into a renewed paradise, she gives up. The force the Condesce serves is far stronger than her, so she cannot beat him. At last, she has come up against something far stronger than herself, and she almost breathes a sigh of *relief* when she lets the illusion of control slip free from her fingers.

-

It is Her Imperious Condescension's death day. She had expected it to come soon enough, but when it does, she still finds herself steeped in denial over it. Enough sweeps of convincing the universe you are a god, and you start to believe it, too. Gods don't die. The Condesce does not die. Particularly not at the hands of children.

Unfortunately, the universe does not understand how humiliating such a death is. These children are gods - real gods - more divine than she ever will be, and when she looks at them, the Condesce recognises that they are as bound to purpose as she is. Neither side was free from destiny.

She takes that small comfort when Rose's descendant stabs her through the chest. As her spirit drifts out of her like a wisp of smoke, there is even some relief. They will be tasked with defying Lord English, now. A spitting image of the Dolorosa, as pretty and broken as she was, will carry the burden of starting the Alternian empire anew.

At long last, Her Imperious Condescension gives up all of her responsibility. It doesn't taste as sweet as she'd dreamt it would. It tastes mostly of blood and sweat, looks like a long stretch of nothing. An expanse of uncharted space. As her vision fades, and a new generation of legends leave her body behind to start the world anew, the Condesce boldly steps forward into oblivion.

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THANKS
FOR
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